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November 29, 1892.

No. 801.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXXI.



"WHOA, JANUARY!" KIRBY SCREAMED, AS THE STALLION PITCHED FORWARD IN A SEEMING EFFORT TO STAND ON ITS HEAD.

OR, The Roster of Rogue River Ranch.

The Romance of a Range Mystery.

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OF ROLLING-STONE," "COWBOY GID," "SIM-
PLE SIM," "KANSAS JIM," THE "TEXAS
TOM CAT" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HEMMEED IN BY FIRE.

SEAL SHELTON drew in his breath with a gasp of dismay. Below him—far below him—raced the rapid and turbulent current of Rogue River, its waters ceaselessly lashed into a yeasty foam. It had an ugly reputation—that suggestively-named river—the reputation of

forever hiding within its hungry maw the hapless creatures that came within its grasp.

Yet, perilous as were its waters, Seal Shelton cast on it a glance which indicated that he was more than half-inclined to hurl himself into them!

There was ample reason for this. He stood on a high bluff overlooking the stream. Stretching back from the bluff were slopes heavily covered with pines. Beneath these thick-standing trees was a half knee-deep carpet of pine needles, which was as highly inflammable as if saturated with kerosene. This bed of needles reached from the bluff to the furthest limits of the pines on the ascending slopes.

Worst of all, this bed of needles was on fire!

How or when the fire had started Shelton could not tell. He had chosen that point for his night's rest because of the soft couch afforded by the needles. When he awoke, there was the smell of smoke in his nostrils, and the advancing flames were threatening his life.

There was no apparent way of escape. The bluff whereon he stood was completely ringed in by the precipice and the on-coming fire. It was a sheer leap of a hundred feet from the bluff to the stream below. He knew the water was deep at that point; but it was swift, and he could not tell what jagged, sword-like rocks might lie hidden in its swirling depths.

Were he even sure no rocks were concealed there, the leap would seem the height of madness. The current boiled against granite on the side of the precipice. The opposite shore was low and grassy; but, as the river was of considerable width and the pull of the current strong, the chances of reaching that shore were not promising.

In the direction of the fire there was no chance whatever. The high-leaping flames were licking the tops of the low pines, and many of the trees were already enveloped and furiously burning. The indications were that the slopes would be denuded of their growth of evergreens and left a blackened waste.

One who has not witnessed a forest fire can scarcely realize the terrific and splendid force of such a conflagration. Its advance is overwhelming and irresistible. Neither man nor beast can stand before it for an instant. The heat crisps, crackles, sears and devours. As a devastating demon there is nothing like it. Other agencies may destroy, but this destroys with an awful fury.

Little wonder, therefore, that Seal Shelton gazed at the advancing fire with blanched cheeks and starting eyes. It formed a vast semicircle of death. Nothing less than the sacrifice of his life could result from any attempt to penetrate it. It was creeping downward with a slow deliberation that was in marked contrast to its hissing and menacing roar.

The only alternative was the river; yet to leap into that was seemingly as suicidal as to hurl himself into the fire. To turn either way was fatal, and there was no safety where he stood.

Beneath him the pine needles were banked high. It was for that reason—for the soft bed which they afforded—he had sought the place for his night's rest.

In a little while the flames would seethe over and through these, and no point of refuge would remain for him.

In a thoroughly desperate mood, Seal drew out and cocked his revolver. To die by fire was a thought too horrible to contemplate. To leap into the raging river and be hurled to death against the granite points was only a degree less fearful. If die he must, he preferred to end his career with a bullet. It was swift and sure. A shock that should reach to every fiber of his being—a swift blackness that was not of earth—then the silence of nothingness.

Yes, if he must die, he infinitely preferred that. And yet, he did not wish to die; and, as his hands clutched the cold steel, and he heard the ominous click of the weapon, his whole soul recoiled.

He was young, and he had much to live for. To a man of twenty-four the world has much to offer. The future has a rosy morning glow that is entrancing.

Shelton glanced longingly down the face of rock, vainly hoping for a way of escape. A few yards above where he stood the tongue of rock stretched further out over the river; and beneath it the water appeared to be calmer. But, only madness would tempt any one to take the leap from that projection.

Thirty feet below the rocky tongue there was a granite point; and from it a rough and almost impassable way led downward to the water's edge. As a last resort, he could spring to that point.

He was in no haste, though, to attempt it. The granite was thickly studded with keen-edged, rock bayonets, and the chance of escaping impalement was not promising. He knew he could not avoid serious and probably fatal injuries. Broken limbs were the least he could hope for. Instant death was more likely to be the result. Yet that was the only possible avenue by which he could leave the fire-girdled bluff.

Still holding the cocked revolver in hand, he turned once more and surveyed the fire. The smoke and heat were becoming intolerable. The threatening semicircle had very perceptibly narrowed. He felt sure he could not remain where he was another ten minutes. His eyes and face burned under the blistering heat, and the hot odors made him gasp for breath. Their pungency choked and stifled him.

He turned his tortured face upward and breathed a prayer. It was almost involuntary. He did not expect an answer. Apparently, only a miracle could save him; and he could not hope that a miracle would be worked in his behalf.

However, as he stood there, a voice reached him; a voice that was spirit-like and faint, as it came to him through the roar of the fire. But, he knew it was not the voice of a spirit. It was even sweeter. He had heard it before, and, as it penetrated to him, he turned about and gave a mighty bound toward the perilous edge of the bluff.

He beheld a vision that was even more suggestive of angelic influence than the voice. The slight, agile form of a woman was clambering up the giddy path that led from the river to the granite point thirty feet or more below him. She carried a rope in one hand, and with the other dragged herself up by means of the projections.

A cry fell from his lips, as his gaze lighted on her. He knew her well. Ay, too well for his peace of mind!

The woman fighting her way furiously up the difficult slope was the daughter of a ranchman who lived not far distant, and whose guest Seal Shelton had been only the previous day.

That visit to the ranch-house had not been the first, however. He had made others—for reasons to be hereafter recorded, and because of the witchery which lay in the eyes of Marian Carlow, the ranchman's daughter.

He had a very high opinion of Jim Carlow, the ranchman; but his opinion of Marian Carlow mounted very high indeed.

And now, she had appeared as if in answer to his prayer, and was calling encouragingly to him and assuring him she would be able to save him.

Seal ran as far out on the rock as he dared, and called back to her.

"Don't try to jump!" she shouted. "You'll kill yourself if you do! Just wait a minute, and I'll be there!"

Her tones were thick and heavy, because of the smoke and her great exertions.

The young man had thrust the pistol back into place, ashamed to let her see it. He was ashamed, now, of the cowardice which had brought the suggestion of self-murder. It had been a horrible contemplation; a thing he would never confess to this regal woman.

"All right!" he sung out. "I'll be as patient as a lamb! But, the faster you hurry, the better I'll feel, for it's getting hotter than an iron furnace up here."

Marian Carlow climbed with the sure-footedness of a goat, and in a comparatively short time stood on the point below and looked up into Seal Shelton's face.

He had thrown himself prostrate on the cliff, as this brought him nearer her and served in a measure to shelter him from the heat.

Such an intense look of love and admiration as shone in his eyes when they met hers! He had never dared breathe to her of the passion that tormented him; but now he felt that he would like to shout it to her in tones of thunder.

Her face was almost as red as his own scorched visage, but he thought not of that. He adoringly saw only the graceful attitude and gesture, and the luminous look of the eyes, as she threw out the tangled coil of rope and poised herself to hurl it.

"Look out, now!" she cried. "Be sure you catch the rope when I throw it!"

He shouted back an obedient and joyful promise. The next instant the rope left her trained hand and hissed upward toward him.

It was a long cast, one to tax even the skill of a cowboy; but Marian Carlow was quite as much of an adept in the use of the lasso as was any "cow-puncher" who ever wore jingling spurs and rode her father's bronchos.

The uncoiling rope struck the rock within a foot of Seal's extended hand, and by a reckless and almost herculean effort he succeeded in grasping it.

"Now fasten it there somewhere!" she panted. "Then, you can let yourself down to this point without much trouble!"

Seal was only too glad to comply.

He secured the end of the lariat to the body of a small pine that stood near him, and then swung himself over the precipice's edge.

This was new work for him, and in spite of his great desire to escape from the fire, he trembled a little as he felt the slight rope give and sway under his weight.

It was not an easy task to lower himself by means of the lariat—for such a feat needs great strength and practice. But, he accomplished it—just how, he could not have told!—and stood trembling and exhausted at Marian Carlow's side.

"That was dreadful!" she whispered, looking up at the fire-threatened point. "I came as fast as I could, and I didn't get here a minute too soon."

He almost fancied there were tears in her eyes, and that moment he would have bartered everything he hoped for in this world for the privilege of pressing her lovingly to him and repaying her for what she had done with a kiss.

Instead of doing this, however, he stammered his thanks in a confused and incoherent way; despising himself the while for his inability to find words with which to appropriately express himself.

"Come; we mustn't stay here!" and she turned to descend the path. "It's getting as hot here as it must be on the cliff. We shall be cooked in a little while."

He had momentarily forgotten the burning heat; but now, recalled to it, it seemed to again scorch to his marrow.

"Permit me to help you down!" he pleaded, extending a hand.

But, she had hurried on, clambering down the rocky incline with an ease which showed she had no need of his assistance.

The heat was considerably abated when they reached the water's edge; and as they passed around a curve, he saw, in a little bend beyond, a horse quietly cropping the grass. Its sides were still wet, showing that it had not been long out of the river.

"You swam your pony across?"

"Certainly! How else could I have got here? If I had lost time by going to the bridge, the chances are you would have been broiled like a lizard before I could get to you."

"That's true!" he said, and again his eyes looked the words of love he dared not speak. "You risked drowning to save me from the fire! Marian, I can never repay you for that, much as I may try!"

"Don't try then!" she said, with an abruptness that hurt him; and without waiting to listen to his expostulations, she walked on and began calling to the pony.

CHAPTER II.

THE HIGH-KICKER'S "SCRAP" WITH A GRIZZLY.

"WHOA! January!"

The appealing exclamation was greeted with uproarious guffaws.

A shaggy-bearded, keen-eyed, but awkward-looking cowboy was seated on a restive broncho, that just then was doing its utmost to pitch its rider over its head.

"Whoa, I say! Drat a beast that's everlastin'ly tryin' to walk on his nose! He seems to think that his years is his front legs an' his front legs is his hind ones, and he's a-tryin' to git all four onto the ground at onc't. If I'm ever to git a chance to tackle the 'General,' you fellers'll have to hook a steer to this critter's tail to hold him down!"

Again uprose that rough merriment, the assembled cowboys vying with each other in trying to crack with their yells the dome of the sky.

It was truly a ludicrous scene. Kent Kirby, the wide-mouthed cowboy, who was gripping the broncho with his knees, would have provoked levity, even had the occasion been a serious one. He was a man past middle age, but wiry and sinewy. It was the twinkle in his grayish eyes, the humor in the lines about his lips, and the reckless playfulness of his general make up that would have attracted attention, however, before all else.

He had reached the ranch only that morning, having walked out from Piebald, over the dozen miles of dusty trail that lay between it and Carlow's ranch on Rogue River. He was in search

of work; and the employment of any applicant at Rogue River Ranch had been recently hemmed in with difficulties.

Two or three months before, Carlow's cowboys had captured a half-grown grizzly in the neighboring hills and brought it home in triumph. The title of "General" had been bestowed on it; and thereafter, every cowboy who sought work of Jim Carlow was required to mount the wildest broncho on the place and rope the half-tamed grizzly.

Kent Kirby's advent occurred at least two weeks prior to the events narrated in the preceding chapter. He recklessly announced himself as the High-Kicker from Killbuck, and boastfully proclaimed that, as a cowboy, roper, rider or fighter, he "c'd jist everlastin'ly knock the p'int off'n anything that run, walked, div, er flew!"

Naturally, this comprehensive boast made him the center of general attention. There were other braggarts at Rogue River Ranch, but never one who had been so daring. Hence, the High-Kicker was clamorously asked to give an immediate exhibition of his skill in riding the wildest broncho and roping the "General."

"Hain't ye got anything tougher'n a bronc' fer me to straddle?" he cried, drawing himself up in well-feigned disgust. "A ring-streaked, greased rainbow, frinstance. Er a cyclone with a' airtquake tied to its tail. Trot out somethin' that's hard to ride, an' I'll show you what ridin' is! A bronc'! Waugh! Askin' me fer to tackle a bronc'! Mel the High-Kicker frum Killbuck!"

"Bring out Satan!" commanded Carlow, turning to one of his men. "He's the Kicker frum Killbuck, is he? If he'll ride Satan an' rope the b'ar, he kin have a job endurin' the remnant o' his nat'ral life."

Jim Carlow was a hard-headed old ranchman who had small use for the average "blow-hard," and he itched for the opportunity to humble the stranger. Satan was a coal-black stallion that had been caught wild on the range, and whose inherent viciousness had resisted every effort at subjugation. One venturesome cowboy had met death in trying to break him; and as a "bucker" and all-around horse contortionist, the black stallion had no equal. He could twist himself into more reckless and crazy postures, and seemingly be in more places at once, than any animal that had ever trod the sward of Rogue River Ranch. Not a cowboy on the place but justly feared him.

It was not customary to require applicants to ride Satan as a test of their fitness, and Jim Carlow would not have ordered the stallion out, but for the braggadocio of the self-styled High-Kicker.

It required the efforts of a half-dozen men to throw the stallion and fit a saddle and bridle to him. When this was accomplished he was brought out of the corral. Three or four lariats were about his neck, with as many cowboys hanging to each.

The High-Kicker from Killbuck viewed these preparations with marked complacency. A broad smile sat on his face and his muscular arms were folded on his breast.

"Now, if you'll bring out the b'ar, I'm ready!" and he walked with firm tread toward the pitching horse.

The stallion was blindfolded and held in one position until Kirby could mount. Then the lariats were cast off, and the expected "circus" commenced.

"Whoa, January!" Kirby screamed, as the stallion pitched forward in a seeming effort to stand on its head. "Hang a house to his tail, will ye, an' hold him down?"

It was quickly seen that, in spite of his boastfulness, Kent Kirby was a horseman of no ordinary character. He retained his place in the saddle with the tenacious grip of the trained broncho-breaker; and all the stallion's bucking and curveting failed to dislodge him. It was an exhibition of skill which brought cries of admiration from the on-lookers.

The scene of conflict was only a few paces from the ranch-house, and from a window of one of the upper rooms two women looked out; at first with fear, and then with flutters of sympathetic triumph. They were Marian Carlow, and her friend Sylvia Sterling.

"Now, bring on yer b'ar!" Kirby shouted, when he began to feel somewhat secure in his seat. "I'm boun' to have a job on this hyer ranch, er break my ole neck a-tryin' fer it. Whoa, January! Bring on yer b'ar!"

The black stallion was far from being conquered, and while the half-grown grizzly was being brought forth, the High-Kicker from Killbuck had all he could do to maintain his

position. More than once he came near being hurled in disgrace from the stallion's back.

The young grizzly was even less tractable than the black stallion, making several angry dashes at the men clustered about him.

When set free in front of the pitching horse, the General drew partially erect and uttered a warning growl.

Kent Kirby's face wore its broadest smile, as he loosed the lariat from the saddle-bow and hurled it skillfully at Bruin's head.

The bear gave an angry snap with his teeth and turned the noose aside with a quick stroke.

Again and again Kirby hurled the rope with unerring skill, and as many times the bear knocked it aside with a blow from his paw.

But, at length, the noose settled over the bear's head and was tightened there by a quick jerk. Then began a scene which was somewhat unexpected.

The black stallion did not like the presence of the grizzly, and it was only by superhuman exertions that Kirby had been able to force it near enough for a cast. The horse greatly feared the bear; and, as events showed, not without reason.

No sooner was the noose set, than the grizzly drew in on the rope with all his tremendous strength. The stallion was not a large animal, and its strength was not equal to that of the bear, as was speedily shown.

In spite of the frightened stallion's lunges, the grizzly steadily shortened the distance between them.

Wild with terror, now, the broncho threw itself backward in a furious bound, and as it did so, the girths of the saddle gave way under the strain.

Satan rolled on the ground in a cloud of dust; and Kent Kirby, unexpectedly plucked from his seat, found himself sprawled beneath the very nose of the bear!

It was a ridiculous as well as dangerous predicament.

With marvelous agility, the High-Kicker, forgetful of his boasts, scrambled backward in prudent haste, barely escaping the blow the General aimed at him.

For an instant the grizzly regarded him, with tongue lolling; then deliberately drew in the saddle and began to chew it as if it were an enemy!

The oppressive stillness that had reigned was broken by hilarious cries, now that the cowboys saw there was to be no tragedy. The High-Kicker had been discomfited, but they had no desire to see him killed.

"Pardners," said the High-Kicker, climbing to his feet with great gravity, "I said I could lick anything that run, walked, flew er div; but I draws the line at grizzlies. They don't do neither. They jist sets on their hunkers an' draws in, an' draws in, till somethin's boun' to bust. If I have to play with grizzlies, pardners, you kin count me out. Wild stallions is bad enough. But grizzlies! Waugh! I don't want a job that costs more'n it's wu'th!"

Jim Carlow and the cowboys were willing to concede, however, that he had justly won a place, and he was made happy shortly thereafter by being informed of the fact and assigned to a cot in the bunk-house and a seat at the general mess-table.

And from that moment forward the High-Kicker from Killbuck was enrolled as one of the cowboys of Rogue River Ranch.

CHAPTER III.

A DISTRESSING SCENE.

IN spite of his love and his deep gratitude, Seal Shelton could not help a feeling of gentle reproach as Marian Carlow moved off toward the pony with such an air of indifference. She would scarcely allow him to thank her for saving his life, and seemed not to care to enter into an extended conversation with him.

Perhaps it was because she had been from the first something of an enigma that his love for her was so fanned and fed. She piqued him by her indifference, and drew him on by appearing not to care whether she was anything to him or not. More than once she had spoken to him sharply, even coldly.

Kent Kirby had said it was because she was a girl of no heart; but, Kent Kirby was notoriously not an admirer of pretty women. Had he been, Seal Shelton would have thought his strictures due to jealousy.

Shelton had visited Rogue River Ranch several days before, claiming to be a sportsman drawn from the savageness of the hills by the sight of human beings in the plain below.

He had met, admired, and then fell desperate-

ly in love with the ranchman's daughter—the girl who had just rescued him from the fire on the cliff.

He had returned to the ranch every day since, and had used his utmost endeavors to ingratiate himself in the good-will and esteem of this young woman.

As he walked after her, now, cut to the quick, yet admiring her every motion, he was forced to acknowledge that so far he had not succeeded very well. He had lost his own heart, but had not gained hers in return.

"I will win her, yet!" he muttered. "I will! I must!"

Without her, life seemed suddenly to have become of little value.

When she gained the pony's side, he hurried up and offered to assist her to mount. She sprang lightly into the saddle, with a scornful little laugh.

"A ranchman's daughter needs no such aid!" and she bent on him an indescribable look. "That will do for fine ladies."

"But you are a lady!" he protested.

"Only old Jim Carlow's girl! Now, we will go on, if you please. I swam the pony across the river just there, but I expect we'd better go round by the bridge. It's safer, if it is further."

"Much safer," he assented, looking at the dangerous current with an inward shudder.

Then he asked himself hopefully if she would have taken that risk, had she not cared for him? It was a thought filled with sweet consolation.

In his present frame of mind, the longest way round was decidedly the shortest way home. Even a much greater distance would not have displeased him. If she did not positively forbid it, he meant to accompany her to the ranch, and the walk there would give him opportunity for more conversation than he had yet had with her.

"How did you know I was in danger?" and he looked up at the flames which were leaping wildly now on the very verge of the precipice.

She shuddered as she followed his glance.

"I was out in the valley there, taking my morning ride. Of course I saw the fire; and then I saw—you!"

"Thank Heaven that you did!" was his fervent exclamation.

They fell into a discussion of the probable origin of the fire, and kept up a desultory conversation until they arrived at the ranch buildings. He confessed he could not at all understand her that morning. Sometimes she seemed fitfully nervous and absent-minded. Frequently she spoke of her father in a way that did not please him. Toward this lover of hers her tones never warmed, nor did her glances kindle. She was genial at times; and then, frigid.

It was with feelings of regret, relief, pain and unsatisfied longing, that he saw the ranch buildings draw near, and knew that the journey was approaching its end. The long walk had been filled with torturing sweets. Blissful pleasure and the hideous nightmare of uncertainty had accompanied him all the way.

When the corral was gained, she sprang lightly from the pony's back, skillfully slipped off the saddle and bridle, and turned the animal into the inclosure. He did not offer to assist her this time, believing she would not desire his aid; that she would again refuse it.

Side by side they walked toward the house, talking indifferently of indifferent things.

The building was a large one, two stories in height, and rendered unsightly by the fact that it had been built up piecemeal by adding on from time to time extra rooms and additions.

It was eight or nine o'clock by this time, and, strange to say, the building and corrals seemed wholly deserted of human life. There were ponies near, and off in the distance a number of cattle grazed. Not far from the house a saddled and bridled broncho was tied to a hitching-post.

This struck Seal Shelton as odd, for the place usually wore an appearance of bustling activity. But when the girl remained silent on the subject, and he remembered that a round-up was to have commenced that morning, he put his unasked questions aside.

There was somebody in the house, that was certain. The hitched broncho showed that. Of course, Sylvia Sterling was there; and probably others.

Neither was prepared, however, for the sight that greeted them as they drew near the open door.

Within the large front room, stretched out dead on his back was Jim Carlow, the ranchman; and near the body crouched the bound form of the High-Kicker from Killbuck, with

Sylvia Sterling standing menacingly over him with a cocked revolver.

"Ain't this hyer a lay, now!" Kirby cried, when he saw Shelton in the doorway. "Tied up tighter'n any colt that ever kicked! An' by a gal! That's what gits me! By a gal! I'll begin to think that gals is wu'ss than grizzlies!"

He held out his bound hands, appealingly.

Marian Carlow's eyes were widened to their utmost and filled with fear and grief, and her face had whitened to the hue of ashes. She reeled on the doorstep, and only saved herself from falling by clutching at Seal for support.

Without a thought of wrong-doing, he passed an arm about her and so prevented her from falling headlong. He would have dragged her back, and kept that sight from her eyes, if the voice of the High-Kicker had not prevented.

"She's keeled over! Better carry her up to her room, Mr. Shelton. Then, if you'll come back an' persuade this hyer interestin' female to go an' wait on her a minute, an' stop p'intin' that there gun at me, I'll be everlastin'ly obleeged. There hain't nothin' dangerouser on this hyer airth than a she-woman with a gun, when her dander is riz!"

The High-Kicker seemed very much in earnest, and very much afraid of the weapon held so threateningly by Sylvia Sterling. He knew that the touch of her finger would send a bullet crashing into his body.

Sylvia had turned her gaze on the intruders as they entered, but she had not lowered the weapon.

Seal Shelton felt the girl hang as a dead weight on his arm; and, lifting her tenderly, he bore her up-stairs and placed her upon the first convenient cot. She revived as he did so; and looked beseechingly into his eyes, as if she would read there the confirmation of her fears.

"It is true, then!" she moaned, pressing her hands to her temples and cowering against the pillow. "True! True! Oh, my God!"

Shelton knew not what to do. Kirby was calling loudly on him for deliverance from the perils of the revolver; and he desired to remain where he was.

"Go!" she urged. "Go and see what ought to be done! You will know best. I shall rely wholly on your wisdom. Oh, it can't be true that father is dead!"

She turned from him with a moan of anguish; and Kirby's voice rising more imploringly, he tore himself from the side of the cot and hastened down-stairs.

"Will ye take that gun away from that crazy critter?"

Sylvia turned toward Seal and lowered the weapon.

"I'm so glad you've come, Mr. Shelton!" in a shaky, horrified voice. "I was afraid to leave this wretch an instant, fearing he might escape. I will turn him over to you. He has killed Mr. Carlow!"

She handed the still cocked weapon to Seal Shelton, and then sunk white and trembling into a chair.

"How is this?" and Shelton looked blankly from one to the other.

He could see that a murder had been committed, but in his own mind he knew that Kent Kirby was not the murderer.

"Well, I come in hyer an' foun' the old gent dead, with that there hole in his breast, an'—"

Kirby was interrupted by the girl.

"Better let me tell the story. Then Mr. Shelton can judge whether I did right or wrong."

"Never was a wronger thing done by anybody! The idee o' me, the High-Kicker from Killbuck—"

"Let her tell her story," Seal admonished.

Kirby was bursting with a desire to plunge into a recital of what had occurred; but he restrained himself with an effort.

"I thought I was all alone on the ranch," Sylvia continued. "I had been walking out in the shade of the cottonwoods, having my rope with me for the purpose of a little practice. You know I've been testing my skill every day!"

"When I came back to the house, I fancied I heard some one talking in a strained, queer kind of voice; and out of curiosity I looked into the room before venturing to enter."

"You may judge of my surprise and horror, when I saw Mr. Carlow lying dead on the floor, and that man," pointing with bitter emphasis to the High-Kicker, "standing over him and muttering in the way I have told you."

"What else could I think but that he killed him! I think it, and I know it! There has been no one else on the place. Mr. Carlow was alive when I started for my walk an hour or more ago. It might have been two hours ago."

Shelton, who had listened with keen interest

to her account, looked again at the dead man. It was plain that the dark deed had been committed some time before. All the evidence indicated that.

Kirby had not challenged any of her statements, but on the contrary had listened to her story with a close keenness akin to fascination.

"Go on!" said Seal, turning again to her.

"Mr. Kirby's back was to me, and I saw he did not know I was near. My rope was in my hand. I don't know why I did it—why I risked it. I guess I was crazy with horror and excitement. I felt that he was the murderer. Scarcely thinking what I did, or what might be the result, I hurled the rope at him. Fortunately it caught about his neck, and the involuntary jerk I gave to it pulled him from his feet and threw him to the floor."

Kirby nodded an affirmative, in wide-mouthed admiration.

"Like to 'a' jerked this ole head off! I thought I'd been hit by a cyclone. Fu'st thing I knowed I was a-sprawlin' on my back there, with my toes a-wavin' a howdy at the ceilin'. My head struck ker-bump, an' more stars twinkled an' danced afore my eyes than I ever see in the hull firmament. As a roper, she's A No. 1. She ought to tackle the grizzly!"

Shelton was astounded by what he heard. That this girl, frail and slight as she seemed, had overthrown the boasting High-Kicker and conquered him single-handed and alone, seemed incredible.

"Go on!" he again commanded, his interest wrought to the highest pitch. "After you roped him, you tied him?"

"K'rect!" and again Kirby nodded admiringly. "She clutched me up tell I couldn't budgel!"

"It wasn't a difficult thing to do," she said, modestly. "The rope choked him into insensibility. Any one could tie up a helpless man. That's what I did; and then I went out to the stable and got ready a horse, intending to ride to Piebald for the sheriff."

"When I came back from the stable, I heard Mr. Kirby making such a row in here, that I secured the horse to the hitching-post and returned to the house to see if there was any danger of his getting away."

"I found he was twisting at the cords, and on the point of freeing himself, and so I drew that revolver on him. Then you came in with Marian; and that's all there is of it."

"Enough, I should say, in all conscience!"

Shelton looked at Kirby in a puzzled, uneasy way, and in evident hesitation.

"I can only admire your courage and determination," turning again to the trembling girl. "But I'm satisfied you are in error in thinking Mr. Kirby guilty of this deed. There's been foul murder committed here, but I'm sufficiently well acquainted with Mr. Kirby to feel sure he is not the murderer."

She saw he was anxious to release the High-Kicker.

"Now, you're talkin' straight! I don't know no more about this hyer thing than the man in the moon. I come into the room, intendin' to ask Carlow about some work he wanted done, an' there I see him a-layin' with that hole in his chest, and this blood on the floor."

"I tell you, I was stumped! an' while I was a-talkin' to myself about it, an' a-tryin' to figger out what it meant, the rope yanked me off'n my feet. There you have the thing frum both sides."

Sylvia, it could be seen, was still convinced of his guilt, and was not pleased with the thought of his release; but she did not put her objections into words.

"It will be all right if I become responsible for his appearance at the proper time and place, will it not?" said Seal, glancing appealingly to her. "You are surely mistaken when you think Kent Kirby guilty of this thing!"

"As you please," she replied, rather coldly, as he thought. "I feel that I have done my duty. Mr. Carlow has been murdered, and he is the only man who has been here. All the other cowboys are away. No one else has been on the place!"

"Except yourself!"

"Except myself!" and she flushed under what she thought an implied imputation.

"Anyway, I shall take the responsibility of releasing him!" Seal declared; and with this, he stepped over and severed the High-Kicker's bonds with his knife.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WITNESS OF BLOOD.

SYLVIA left the room and the two men brought in a cot and placed on it the body of the murdered man.

They were about to take steps to put the blood-stained room in a more presentable condition, when Shelton was called from this self-imposed task by the voice of Marian.

She had descended from the second floor, and was at the bottom of the stairway; but had ventured no further.

He hurried to her, filled with anxiety. There was something startling in the tones she had used.

He found her very white and shaky, seemingly with scarcely enough strength to support the tottering weight of the body.

In one hand she held a little package, which she now extended to him.

"Take this; and when you have examined it and heard my story, tell me what you think about it!"

Her words were filled with a dull horror.

"What is it?" he said, without venturing to ascertain.

"Help me up-stairs again, and I'll tell you. And as we go there's something on the stairway I want you to look at!"

She shuddered, and the horror in her voice seemed to increase.

He felt his own form shaking, for her manner was infectious.

"What is it?" he again questioned; but this time referring to the thing on the stairway, whatever it might be.

He put a supporting arm lovingly about her; and, as she did not reply, assisted her in her tottering ascent.

"There! Tell me what that is!"

She pointed her finger to a red blotch on one of the steps, her voice thrilled fearfully, and she turned her face away.

He stared at the gruesome sight as if fascinated.

What he saw was a bloody footprint. The bloody imprint of a woman's shoe!

His brain reeled, and his senses seemed deserting him.

"Tell me the meaning of it!" she whispered hollowly.

"I cannot!" he averred, hurrying on past the fearful sight.

"You see the room you placed me in?" she said, when they reached the upper floor.

She pointed to the room containing the cot on which he had deposited her.

"That is Sylvia's room. Now, you may look at the packet I gave you. I was so faint that I finally thought I would lie down on the bed, and when I lifted the pillow to arrange it, I found that roll."

There was a bed in the room, in addition to the cot. He closely scrutinized it. The rumpled pillow had been moved out of place, and now lay on the white covering.

"I found that beneath the pillow!" she repeated, sinking horrifiedly into a chair. "Beneath Sylvia's pillow! And that footprint on the stairs!"

He opened the packet and found it to contain a roll of bills of large denominations.

Again his brain was whirling in a giddy maze. What did it all mean? Was the question he was over and over asking himself.

"Can you explain it?" and he looked at her blankly.

"I think I can!"

Her voice was cold and hard, and her face absolutely colorless.

Her evident anguish cut him to the quick. If he had been in love with her before, he was even more in love with her, since this great sorrow had befallen her.

"It must have been Sylvia," answering his interrogative look. "It's terrible to think so, but I can find no other explanation. What else can be the meaning of the footprint, and of this roll of bills found under the pillow? I know that Sylvia had no money."

"Tell me about her?" he requested. "If I know more about her, perhaps I can form a theory. How long has she been here? When did you get acquainted with her?"

She did not reply instantly. Her thoughts appeared to be turned inward, for she seemed to look at him without seeing him. At the same time she was apparently listening to the heavy tread of Kirby's boots in the room below. That terrible room below!

She shuddered, as she opened her lips to speak.

"I haven't known her a great while. We attended the same school in Denver. I think she came there about three months ago. We were acquaintances, but not close friends. Still, I liked her; for she is smart and bright. She rather forced herself on me when vacation came."

He was listening attentively, distressed by the icy hardness of her tones, yet charmed beyond measure by her cold, queenly beauty.

She was a handsome woman, even regal, though her pallor was now too pronounced. She was suffering intensely. It required no keenness of vision to see that; and this very suffering drew him nearer to her.

"She wanted to accompany me home, and of course I couldn't very well refuse. She said she had no home of her own, and no place in which to spend her vacation. Naturally, she didn't care to stay at the school. So I consented; and she came.

She was familiar with ranch ways, her father having been a ranchman on the Platte. When he died, he left her without a penny, and she has since supported herself by teaching. She got a little money ahead and came to the boarding-school to more thoroughly fit herself for that. At any rate, that was her story. I don't know how much to believe it, now. And that is all I know about her."

To Shelton, the proof of Sylvia Sterling's guilt was conclusive. Sylvia was a penniless girl. Of her antecedents practically nothing was known. A roll of bank bills had been found under her pillow. There was the bloody print of a woman's shoe on the stairway! Jim Carlow was known to have kept large sums of money about him.

"I will look into the matter!" he declared. "She must be guilty. We will need to exercise care, though, to keep her from suspecting anything and taking the alarm. I will get Kent Kirby to help me, and we'll sift the thing to the bottom. But, I must caution you: Above all things, don't change in the least in your attitude toward her. She is sure to become frightened if you do. Can I rely on you in that?"

She looked at him gratefully—so gratefully that his heart gave a delirious bound.

"I will try to be discreet, though you must know you have set me a difficult task. Oh, my poor father! My poor father!"

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed convulsively.

Seal did not think it wise to interrupt this outburst of grief; so he left her sobbing, and went below stairs to confer with Kirby in regard to what he had seen and heard.

CHAPTER V.

THE OUTLOOK.

KIRBY was not in the room, and when he stepped out to see what had become of him, he found him conversing with two of the cowboys who had returned to the ranch for some articles that had been forgotten that morning.

The looks of the cowboys showed how surprised and horrified they were at the story told by Kirby. They dismounted and came toward the house when they saw Seal. The presence of the cowboys prevented Seal from disclosing to the High-Kicker the strange account he had just received from Marian Carlow; and for some time thereafter he was given no opportunity to speak of it.

The cowboys gave the room and its belongings a minute examination; then one of them rode away to Piebald for the sheriff and coroner, and the other returned to the round-up outfit to acquaint them with what had occurred.

Shelton went back up-stairs after awhile, and again engaged Marian in a conversation concerning the murder. She did not desire to look on the body, she declared, in answer to one of his questions; and he saw truly, from her ghastly countenance, that the sight would have been too much for her overstrained nerves.

Some time elapsed before he descended. Then he found the High-Kicker sitting moodily on a block near the door, buried in deep thought.

Kirby's face lightened, when Seal came in view, and the old grotesque smile again played about his homely mouth. Under all circumstances, both grave and gay, the High-Kicker was the irresistibly droll clown of the camp.

"Ye look solemn enough fer a ghost!" and his mouth expanded in a forced grin. "Likely you've seen 'em, too. I've been seein' ghosts an' shadders, an' sich, tell I don't know my own name. The wu'st of it is, there's a gal on this hyer place that p'intedly thinks I'm wicked. I've seen her two or three times within the last half-hour, an' she's a-watchin' me constant. She thinks I'm a-lookin' out fer a chance to give the ranch the slip, an' she's boun' an' determined I sha'n't."

He was evidently sore over the fact that he had been roped and tied up so skillfully by a woman. He had not mentioned it to the cow-

boys; and Seal, knowing how he felt, avoided the subject.

"I reckon that when the sheriff an' corner comes, she'll up an' tell 'em all about it, an' how she yanked me with that rope."

He appeared not to care for the accusation of murder so much as the revelation of how he had been triced up by a woman.

"What will you say when she expresses her belief that you killed Jim Carlow?" was the anxious question.

"That it p'intedly ain't so! You took a good look at the body, I reckon, when you seen it fu'st? Carlow had been dead nigh onto two hours, an' I kin show by Ned Tarbox whur I was at about that time. Tarbox an' me was more'n two miles from this place, tryin' to ketch some ponies. There wus some ponies out there that Carlow wanted to send away, an' I wus to have druv 'em to the railway station. When we got 'em corraled, Tarbox rode off to j'ine the outfit that was goin' on the round-up, an' I come on home to ask Carlow some questions concernin' what I wus to do with the money the ponies wus expected to bring.

"You know the rest. When I got to the house, I foun' Carlow dead; an' I could see he'd been dead a good while; and whilst I wus a-standin' there a-wonderin' over it, that gal yanked me."

This information brought to Shelton a sense of relief. He knew that Kent Kirby was not guilty of the crime; but he had feared there might be a difficulty in convincing the sheriff and coroner of that fact, in face of the statements which he expected Sylvia Sterling to make. Therefore, he was glad to know that an *alibi* was possible. Tarbox was a cowboy well known throughout the entire region, and his sworn testimony would not be called in question.

Shelton's interest in the High-Kicker from Killbuck may need explanation. They were more than passing acquaintances; they were friends and comrades. Their presence at Rogue River Ranch was not accidental. Their advent there had had a well-defined purpose.

For some time it had been known to the authorities that large quantities of counterfeit money were being "shoved" on the unsuspecting public. The counterfeits were finely executed and difficult of detection, and therefore doubly dangerous.

Some work had been required to locate the source of their emanation. This was not ascertained to a certainty; but the ranch at Rogue River became strongly suspected; and Jim Carlow was thought to be the leader of the gang of counterfeiters.

For the purpose of arriving at the truth and bringing the guilty parties to justice, Kent Kirby had been sent to Rogue River. He had come there as a cowboy seeking work; and the manner in which he gained access to the place and to the confidence of the ranchman and the cowboys has been seen.

He was accounted one of the best men in the Secret Service. He had spent years of his life in that dangerous work on the plains and in the mountains, assuming a multiplicity of disguises. He was strong of frame, big of heart, jovial—just the man to mix successfully with the rough characters he was called on to encounter.

He had been many things before coming to Rogue River, but never the High-Kicker from Killbuck. That was one of his latest ideas, and he had worked it, as he would have said, "for all it was worth."

Seal Shelton was neither so old nor so experienced, yet he was considered a good man, by his superiors, and accounted worthy to assist Kent Kirby in the delicate work required at Rogue River. So far, he had seemingly accomplished nothing, except to fall heels-over-head in love with the ranchman's pretty daughter. And now, a mystery had arisen, which promised to draw him further than ever from the task that had been given into his hands.

In rank, he was Kirby's inferior, and subject to the latter's orders.

"I have some of that counterfeit money," Seal declared, something like exultation in his voice. "There can be no doubt, I think, that we're on the right track, as far as that is concerned. I've got a lot of bills here, and I'm sure some of them are counterfeits."

He was standing near the door, and spoke in low tones.

Notwithstanding Seal's caution, Kirby raised a finger warningly and looked anxiously about.

Seal was about to produce the bills, but Kirby's manner restrained him.

"We'd better git fuder off frum the house before we go to mouthin' about that there counterfeit business!" the High-Kicker whispered, rising and looking out toward the cotton-

wood grove. "In my time I've knowed walls to have years bigger'n any elephant's."

He arose very deliberately, grinned in his odd way, as if the subject were a comic instead of an exciting one; and then, with his hands in his pockets, shuffled slowly in the direction of the grove.

It was not so easy for Seal to hide his intense excitement. He did his best, however; and, overtaking Kirby, walked quietly at his side until the screen of the cottonwoods hid them from the view of any one at the house.

He turned, before plunging into this retreat, and saw Sylvia Sterling enter the doorway and turn toward the stairs.

His pulse bounded, as his fancy pictured the scene of the meeting between Sylvia and Marian. How would Marian conduct herself in the presence of the murderess? Would she be able to hide from her her terrible suspicions? Ay, more than suspicions: the almost certainty of Sylvia's guilt!

He was not given time to dwell on this. Kirby's voice reached him.

The High-Kicker had seated himself deliberately at the foot of one of the cottonwoods, and now held out a sinewy, hairy hand.

"Lemme look at that money. You're certain there's counterfeits amongst it? Whur did ye git it?"

"From Marian Carlow," replied Seal, producing the roll of bills and handing them over. "There are several counterfeits there, or I don't know counterfeit money when I see it. The money was old Carlow's, and it seems to me, that's pretty good proof that he's been at the counterfeit business."

The High-Kicker took the bills and closely inspected them. The roll represented over a thousand dollars, and about three hundred dollars of it was undoubtedly spurious. He placed these in a little pile by themselves, and then laid them on top of the good money.

"You hain't tol' me why she gave you this? Pears to me that's important. Why did that gal hand over sich a wad o' bills?"

This was just the information Seal had been dying to communicate; and he now hastened to put Kirby in possession of all the facts and surmises that had come to his knowledge. He told his story rapidly, excitedly, almost fiercely.

The High-Kicker listened in grim and ominous silence.

"An' so you've calk'lated that Sylvia Sterlin' put a knife into the ole man for the purpose o' gittin' that money?"

"I think she did."

"Well, I don't!"

CHAPTER VI.

KENT KIRBY'S THEORY.

So emphatic was Kent Kirby's declaration that Seal Shelton recoiled a step, in undisguised surprise.

"You don't?"

"That's what I said, boy! I don't!"

Seal did not like to be addressed as "boy," any more than he liked the general tone in which Kirby couched his opinion.

"Then, who do you think did it?"

"Jim Carlow's gal, Marian! Mary Ann, I should have said!"

Seal Shelton's face turned an angry purple.

"Take that back!" he shouted. "Take it back, or by the Eternal—"

He stopped abruptly, choking in his rage.

"Explain what you mean, Kirby!" making a desperate effort to calm himself. "I don't think you know what you're saying!"

An unruffled, expansive grin rested on Kirby's broad face.

"So, the wind lays in that direction, does it?"

"Will you explain what you mean, Kent Kirby?"

"Well, I've been a-watchin' this other biz so clost that I hadn't noticed you'd fell in love with the gal!"

Seal's face was still aflame with anger, and these words were not calculated to allay his heat.

"You're mistaken, Kirby—woefully mistaken! Why, you must be blind to take such a view of it. What reason can you have for thinking Marian Carlow guilty of that awful crime? You must have a reason!"

The High-Kicker had not been in the least ruffled by the young man's manifest wrath.

"I wus goin' to tell ye, if you'd 'a' give me a chance. I've got reasons in plenty. Tip-top good ones, too! You'll say they're good ones, if you ain't so stuck on the gal that you've gone stone blind!"

"They'll have to be good ones to make me believe so monstrous a thing as that!"

His face was still red, and his shaky voice betrayed the intensity of his feelings.

"Sit down there, then, an' try to keep cool. You've got to keep cool while I tell it, even if you have to put a chunk of ice on yer head."

"You seen the print uv a bloody shoe on the stairs? A woman's shoe?"

"I did!"

"I kin show you that identical shoe!"

He got up from the ground, went a few paces beyond, and returned with a pair of worn shoes which he had fished from the concealment of a tangle of high grass.

Seal recognized the shoes at once as Marian's. They were cut in a peculiar manner, and he could not mistake them. He remembered that he had seen her wear them on the occasion of his last visit. What shocked and surprised him was that there were undoubted blood-stains on the heels and soles. One of them, especially, was marked very much like the stain on the stairway.

The High-Kicker read the anguish in the young man's eyes, and felt a secret sympathy for him.

"I foun' these whur you'd not think uv lookin' fer 'em," he declared, not waiting to be questioned. "I was goin' by the mouth o' the old well jist t'other side o' the hoss corral, an' my optics happened to light on this hyer shoe."

He tapped one of them significantly, and looked keenly at Seal.

"The place is all growed up with high weeds, you know, an' it was only by accident, as you may say, that my eyes dropped onto this. I stepped over an' picked it up; an' when I see there was blood on it, I begin lookin' round fer its mate. That there mate was in the well; an' when I went down after it, I foun' somethin' else that was a good deal p'inteder. Fact o' the biz is, it was very sharply p'inteder!"

The grotesque grin had vanished from his face, and he was speaking low and earnestly.

Now he drew out and exhibited to Seal a keen-pointed dagger, all stained and covered with blood! Worse than all, it was Marian Carlow's dagger! Seal knew it to be hers; so that on that head there could be no discussion.

"You know whose the things is! Jim Carlow was killed with this hyer sticker, an' the party what killed him wore these hyer shoes. You kin put two an' two together an' make four out uv it, jist as well as I kin. He, she, er it—whoever er whatever it was that wore these hyer shoes an' used this hyer dagger—aimed to throw the things into the well whur they wusn't likely to be foun' in a hurry. One o' the shoes wusn't pitched fur enough, an' I chanced to see it. I say the person what done all this was Marian Carlow. You say it wusn't. That's the difference!"

Young Shelton was trembling so violently he could scarcely stand upright. Kirby certainly had made out a strong case—one of the strongest possible; and yet Seal did not for a moment acknowledge that the murderess could have been Carlow's daughter. He would not believe it. He felt—he knew—she was incapable of such a horrible act, and he did not hesitate to say so.

"Why should she have done such a thing?" he questioned. "She could not have done it! When this murder occurred, she was far down the valley trail. She was riding up the valley trail when she saw the fire. Why, man! almost at the time you think she was doing this terrible thing, she was engaged in rescuing me from the fire on the cliff. I suppose you forget about that?"

"I don't fergit nothin'. You ask me a dozen questions, an' then go on to prove yer case before givin' me a chance to answer 'em."

"Why did she kill the old man—her father? He wusn't her father! I foun' that out three er four days ago. An' I foun' out, too, that ole Carlow's been meaner'n pusley to her ever sense she's been home, this time. She wus not reely his gal, as I said; but he'd willed ever'thing to her. Yisterday they had a big row, an' he threatened to change the will an' cut her off without a penny. I heard the row myself, fer it's been my bizness to keep my years wide open on this place. He started it, an' it was all his fault."

"My idee is, now, that she concluded she wouldn't 'low him a chance to change that will an' make a beggar uv her, as he threatened to do!"

This was news to Shelton—news of the most astounding character. It recalled to his mind the bitter sentences he had heard her speak that morning concerning Carlow.

"But the fire! You forget the fire!"

He was resolved not to believe.

The old grotesque smile came back to the High-Kicker's face.

"D'you know what I think 'bout that fire, Seal? Marian Carlow started that there fire!"

"Impossible!"

"Mary Ann Carlow started that fire!" with even more emphasis. "That's her name, though she's changed it to what she thinks is more stylish, sense she's been goin' to boardin' school. I heard the ole man accuse her o' that, when they were jowerin' yisterday."

"But she couldn't have started the fire?"

"I've been puttin' more than two an' two together, Seal! I've been a-fliggerin' on this case purty steady fer the past hour. Marian Carlow don't suspect me—but jist thinks I'm a ordinary, no-good sort o' cowboy that ain't wu'th heedin'. But you! She thinks you're a detective. She ain't a fool, neither; an' she knows you are already dead in love with her."

"To make things certain, though, an' to fer-ever blind ye to the truth, she slipped down to the slope back o' the cliff, after she'd knifed the ole man, an' set fire to the pine needles. Then she put herself in readiness to resky you when the proper time come."

"And you believe all that rot?" Seal cried, hotly and scornfully. "If you do, you're a bigger fool than I ever thought you to be. She couldn't have done the things you say—and she wouldn't have done them if she could. She didn't know I was on the cliff. The whole theory is weak and—and—devilish!"

He was shaking with the fury of an aroused and intense anger.

Kirby's face colored a little under these stinging words.

"If she didn't, will ye tell me who did, then?"

"I've told you once: Sylvia Sterling!"

A look of scorn crept into Kirby's eyes.

"After you'd cut me loose, an' while Marian was up-stairs, Sylvia Sterlin' went out to put away the horse that she'd tied to the hitchin'-post. You'll say yourself that she ain't no fool. Would she 'a' done that, knowin' that this hyer roll o' money was under her piller, whur it was likely to be foun' at any minute! Will you p'inteder answer me that question?"

The query was a stunner; and Shelton had no ready answer. He had felt sure of Sylvia's guilt. If Sylvia had not killed Jim Carlow for his money, who had put that roll of bills under her pillow?

His brain reeled.

"Will you answer me that question?"

"You're an old fool, Kent Kirby, and I won't answer you anything!"

With this savage retort, he abruptly left the shelter of the cottonwoods and hurried toward the ranch-house, neglecting to reclaim the roll of bills he had placed in the High-Kicker's hands.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HIGH-KICKER'S ADVANCEMENT.

CASSIUS CLAY COLTON, the sheriff, or "Cash" Colton, as he was universally called, came over from Piebald, that afternoon, accompanied by the coroner.

Colton was not a fierce brawler nor a man of many words. He went about his business in a quiet manner, and with a certain cold sternness that had far more power to compel the recognition and silence of a turbulent mob than would any amount of threatening and blustering brag.

As for the coroner, he was a young man—scarcely more than a boy—who, having just graduated from an Eastern college, had ventured into the wilds of the "woolly" West in haste for the practice that is so long coming in older regions.

Kent Kirby and Seal Shelton welcomed the sheriff and coroner, and conducted them at once to the room in which lay Jim Carlow's body.

When a hasty examination had been made, and the four came out of the house to converse on the disagreeable subject, they beheld the round-up outfit returning across the prairie at a brisk canter.

As the cowboys drew up in front of the house with a clatter of hoofs, Tom Conner, the foreman, leaped from his saddle and advanced to greet the quartet standing near the doorway.

It took but a few words to put him in possession of the principal facts. The story of Carlow's murder had already been told him by the cowboy who had overtaken the outfit.

There was something ominous in the glance of Conner's eye, and in the way he looked at the High-Kicker, after having surveyed the body.

The coroner with the sheriff's aid, speedily impaneled a jury.

Before any witnesses were called, Seal Shelton took Kirby aside and entreated him to make no mention of the finding of the shoes and dagger, or of the suspicious he held against Marian Carlow.

"It will kill her, if you do!" he declared with tremulous emphasis. "I know she is not guilty. I'm just as sure of that fact as that I'm standing here. To disclose what you told me, would be to cast on her undeserved suspicion and subject her to calumnious gossip. Therefore, I beg of you!"

Kirby was not pleased with this request, but he nevertheless agreed to comply—to remain silent—on one condition: and that was, that Seal was to say nothing to implicate Sylvia.

Seal could promise for himself, but he was not authorized to make any agreement in behalf of Miss Carlow. What she might say or do could only be problematical.

Seal Shelton did not think of it in that light, but in asking Kirby to remain silent he had been very selfish in behalf of the woman he loved—very forgetful of the interests of his friend and partner.

The examination of witnesses by the coroner did not consume a great deal of time. The High-Kicker abstained from any mention of his discoveries—a thing not difficult, as no questions were put along that line.

Miss Carlow surprised him by also remaining silent concerning her suspicions against Sylvia Sterling.

Sylvia was the only one who had anything of interest to relate, and her story wholly concerned Kent Kirby. She told how she had found him standing over the body, and how she had reped and tied him, and then released him at the request of Seal.

The suppressed excitement of the cowboys broke into loud murmurs at this, and they looked darkly and threateningly at the High-Kicker.

The alibi which Kirby set up to prove his innocence was convincing enough to the sheriff and coroner, but it did not satisfy Tom Conner, the Rogue River foreman.

Conner said nothing, however, until after the officers of the law had departed.

The inquest developed nothing conclusively, a thing which did not at all please Conner, who was thirsting for revenge on the man who slew his employer.

Trouble began to brew before the officers were out of sight.

Conner, calling a number of his intimates and cronies into the bunk-room, then broke into fierce invective against the High-Kicker from Killbuck.

"He's a fraud, pards! A fraud of the first water; and I've felt sure of it since I first saw him. He killed Jim Carlow;—as good a man as ever rode a horse!"

"Hang him!" cried one of the men; and there was a low mutter of approval.

"You seen the girl, pards! Jim Carlow's girl! The girl that we all love and respect! You seen how she is cryin' her eyes out over this biz. The thing is breakin' her heart. She already looks like a ghost. We'll have her to bury alongside of her dad inside of a month, or I miss my guess. Not only has this villain killed Jim Carlow, but he's killin' Carlow's daughter. Shall we let such a mango?"

A yell of "No!" sprung fiercely from the bearded lips of the Rogue River cowboys. They had forgotten their caution.

"Git a lariat, then, and foller me! and I'll show you how to avenge this bloody work!"

The yell penetrated to the upper room, in which Marian Carlow was sitting with Sylvia Sterling. Both girls were in tears.

"What's the meaning of that?" Marian questioned, springing to her feet.

She had recognized the thrill of devilish hate in the outcry and knew it portended ill to some one.

Sylvia also sprung up, and advanced to the window.

As they looked out, they saw Conner leave the bunk-room at the head of the cowboys. The latter were excitedly flourishing revolvers. One of them swung a coiled lariat.

"What does it mean?" Marian again asked.

Kirby and Shelton likewise heard the ominous outcry, and startledly looked at each other for an explanation.

"I 'low they're comin' fer one o' us!" Kirby declared, catching a glimpse of the advancing men. "I've been more'n half expectin' something o' the kind fer this hyer half-hour. I reckon, too, it's me they're after!"

The young man could not believe Kirby spoke truly, for the smile that rested on the High-Kicker's face indicated anything but fear. But when he saw Kirby slip a revolver into his coat-pocket where it could be got at handily the act went far toward convincing him that Kirby was not jesting.

Straight for the little building in whose shadow the two were standing did Conner advance at the head of the angry cowboys.

There came an interruption, however, from an unexpected source. Marian Carlow ran from the house, and, falling on her knees before Conner, implored him to spare the threatened man for her sake.

"Hanged if we do!" Conner exclaimed, pushing her roughly aside.

"I appeal to you, men, to prevent this crime!" and she turned to Conner's followers.

There was a hesitating halt, which she took advantage of to continue her pleadings.

"If you respect me—if you respect the memory of Jim Carlow, my father, do not do this thing!"

The tears were in her eyes, and her tones quavered irresistibly.

The words and attitude—above all the tears—touched these rough men. They drew back and refused to proceed further.

Conner became angry at this, and tried to urge them to follow him, branding them as a set of cowards for hanging back at this time.

His words were without avail, and only served to incense the cowboys against him. They could but remember that he had incited them to the contemplation of the lynching by touching on their sympathy for Carlow's daughter; and now they saw he was utterly regardless of this daughter's wishes and feelings. They sulked, refused to go; and, when his words grew wrathier and more galling, they retreated in a body to the bunk-room.

Marian's face had lost its pallor and was now aflame with anger. She turned on Conner with infinite scorn.

"As the daughter of Jim Carlow, and now the sole owner of this ranch, I dismiss you from my service! You are no longer foreman here, Tom Conner! Your pay stops this minute; and so does the pay of any one who offers to obey your orders!"

She knew the men heard her, for she purposely raised her voice.

Conner turned a ghastly hue, and for an instant seemed about to hurl a retort. But he thought better of it, and turned away abashed and humiliated, as well as indignant.

An hour later Marian Carlow summoned the cowboys into her presence and proclaimed to them that she had appointed Kent Kirby to the position which Conner had held—and this she did without consulting either the High-Kicker or Seal.

"What do you make of it?" Seal queried, in supreme astonishment.

Kent Kirby did not express the thought that was in his mind. He was wondering if this were not a trick to gain his favor and blind him to her guilt. Had she shrewdly penetrated his disguise and recognized him as a masquerading detective?

There were, however, many things to combat this idea. Strongest of all was this: If she believed him a detective and feared him, why did she not let Conner proceed with the lynching?

CHAPTER VIII.

A WILD INFATUATION.

JIM CARLOW rested quietly in his narrow bed under the shade of the cottonwoods—the cottonwoods his own hands had assisted in planting, and whose growth he had lovingly watched.

A week had slipped by since the morning of the murder; a week full of excitement and heart-ache for Marian Carlow. How she had got through the long hours, she could scarcely have told. As the reader will understand, Sylvia's attempts to comfort and console her could have only the opposite effect.

It had been a difficult thing to remain silent as she had been commanded to do by Seal Shelton.

The funeral had been largely attended by neighboring ranchmen and cowboys, for the dead man had been widely known. But that was all over, now. It seemed to her that a year had elapsed since she had heard the clods fall dully and sullenly on the coffin-lid.

Seal Shelton had sought every opportunity to be near her without appearing to intrude his presence. The events of that week had more and more endeared her to him. Kent Kirby's wild suspicion had impressed him horribly. He knew Kirby was wrong, and yet he had not late-

ly tried to change Kirby's opinion on the subject. He felt it would be a waste of words and a trial too exasperating to endure. Kirby was a man whose mind was not easily changed, once an opinion had obtained firm lodgment in it.

Seal talked to Marian of indifferent things during that week. He never alluded to the murder, when it could be avoided; and he never hinted on the subject always uppermost in his thoughts—his deep love for her.

She was truly a beautiful woman—he thought the handsomest woman he had ever seen. This was not the opinion of a man who had long been a stranger to female loveliness. And the more he studied her and watched her, the more beautiful he deemed her.

Almost every evening they took a long walk in the direction of the river. Sylvia seldom accompanied them; possibly for the reason that she felt her company was not desired.

Seal had all these days been closely watching Sylvia for some manifestation of guilty knowledge. He had seen none. But there was one thing he had noticed. Sylvia was withdrawing more and more within herself. She was losing her frank open-heartedness, and appeared to be becoming secretive and morose.

Of course, Seal put his own construction on this. He could not call it a manifestation of guilt, but he felt sure there was a reason for it, and that that reason concerned Jim Carlow's murder.

He spoke to Marian on the subject, and found that she had observed the same thing.

"It is not to be wondered at, though!" she had replied. "I should think she would go crazy under that weight of guilt. How she bears up as well as she does has been a puzzle to me. Her moodiness and watchful furtiveness have ample explanation, I think."

"No doubt you find it hard to mask your real feelings and endure her presence, Marian!" he said, with marked gentleness.

"Hard! It has been an eternity of torture. I'm afraid I can't endure it much longer. I feel so like a vile hypocrite—so like an impostor! So like a murderess, myself! Shall I have to stand it much longer? Have you discovered nothing yet?"

He dared not speak of what he had heard from the lips of Kent Kirby.

"Nothing!" he replied. "Nothing of any consequence. Mr. Kirby fancies he has found some clues, but I know he is in error. As soon as I know anything I will hasten to inform you of it. Believe me, I am doing all I can to learn the truth, and establish the guilt of the right party, regardless of who that may be."

He felt he was not speaking truly in this, for he had purposely blinded himself to every indication that might point to Marian.

His heart went out to her in a great wave of feeling. Kirby's charges against this queenly woman seemed more cruel than ever.

The conversation had brought back to her the full horror of Carlow's murder. Her voice faltered, and the tears swam in her eyes.

They were now on the brink of Rogue River. The afternoon sun was behind the towering cliff, which cast long and pinnacled shadows across the river valley.

He pointed to a convenient stone which formed a seat backed by a rocky recess, and she sunk down shivering, looking about in a frightened and startled way.

He took a seat by her side, intending to turn the conversation into more cheerful channels. But the pain in her face and the touch of her hand made his pent-up love struggle for utterance.

"You are so lonely, Marian; so in need of advice and companionship, and—"

She looked at him in that abstracted way in which she seemed neither to see nor hear.

"I am very lonely," she said, finally, shivering again. "Very lonely and wretched! Do you know, Mr. Shelton, I begin to think I am myself suspected of father's murder. People look at me so queerly, sometimes." Mr. Kirby—

Her words shocked him.

"Bother Mr. Kirby! He's an old—"

His voice shook and he did not complete the sentence.

"Kirby is a very good man, and I am glad you appointed him foreman in Conner's place. He is a friend of mine. But he is queer and odd—"

He was about to say no attention should be paid to anything Kirby did or said.

"Your mind was overstrained, and what you imagined was possibly all fancy."

She looked very disconsolate, and the evident pain in her face deeply touched him.

"You are so alone and so wretched," and he ventured to slip a hand across her shoulder. "Marian, are you blind? Will you persist in not seeing what is so obvious to every one else? I love you! I love you better than my own life! Will you not give me the privilege of being more to you than even a father could be? Your husband!"

She shrunk from him a little; and then, to his great surprise, gave way to a flood of tears.

Taking advantage of her momentary weakness, he drew her to him in a close embrace and pressed his lips to hers.

"Will you not tell me my love is returned?" he panted. "You must tell me that! I shall die if you do not! I feel that I cannot live without you!"

For a moment she struggled vainly, and then permitted her head to rest passively and silently against his breast.

"Tell me that, Marian!" he pleaded. "Do not force me to go away from this place with all my hopes blighted!"

She looked into his face, and he saw that her eyes were shining like stars through the mist of her tears.

"You have made me very happy," she said, simply. "You foolish fellow! You ought to know without my saying so, that your love is returned. Would I have risked death on the cliff to save you from the fire, if it were not so?"

"But before I can make any promises to you, I must first make a confession. A startling confession!"

He gasped. Could it be that Kirby was right in his surmises?

"Let me hear it!" and he drew her again to him.

She flushed and hesitated.

"My name is not Marian Carlow! It is Mary Ann Talbott! Mr. Carlow was not my father! I have lived with him for many years, though, and have passed as his child. My parents died when I was quite small. Mr. Carlow had been in love with my mother before she married my father; and so, for her sake, he took me and made me as his own child."

"I don't like the name of Mary Ann, and I changed it to Marian. I'm afraid I was not a very good daughter to Mr. Carlow, though I thought a great deal of him. I suppose I oughtn't to say it, now that he's dead, but he was very obstinate and very cruel sometimes, and we frequently had quarrels—bitter quarrels! The memory of that has hung like a millstone about my neck."

This confession was in part a confirmation of what Kent Kirby had told him, but it did not make him think Kirby any nearer right in his general surmises. Rather, it more firmly convinced him that Kirby was wrong.

He wanted to ask about the shoes and the dagger, feeling certain she could fully and reasonably explain these seemingly black circumstances; but he recoiled from any mention of the subject.

"It is nothing to me whether you are Carlow's daughter or not!" he asserted in his enraptured tones. "It is enough for me to know that you love me, and will be my wife. You will give me that promise?"

"Yes!" she whispered. "If I have lost a father, I have gained you, Seal, and that is everything!"

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN'S HATE.

TOM CONNER, the discharged foreman, did not leave the ranch for use of his dismissal. The days passed; and his actions showed he had no notion of doing anything of the kind; and, as hospitality is one of the cardinal virtues in the range region, there was no one to point him in the direction of Piebald and hint to him that his room was better than his company.

As a foreman, he had been somewhat domineering; and while a few of his intimate cronies were angered at his deposition, the majority of the Rogue River cowboys were secretly pleased with the change.

He continued to sleep in the bunk-room, take his meals at the mess-table, and to conduct himself as if he belonged to the ranch. He especially fraternized with the few cowboys who were his firm friends; and on many occasions was to be seen conversing with them in low tones when not near to hear.

Both Seal Shelton and Kent Kirby watched him as closely as possible, but he did nothing to call for censure. He cast on the High-Kicker many glances of hatred and contempt, but these Kirby felt he could afford to pass by in silence.

So far as was known to the detectives, Conner never referred to the attempt at lynching.

There could be little doubt, however, that his failure and humiliation on that occasion rankled deeply, and that he secretly nourished plans for revenge.

There was another on the place who was watching Tom Conner's actions quite as closely; and that was Sylvia Sterling.

A sudden and jealous hatred of Seal Shelton and Marian Carlow had grown up in her heart. She saw that Conner also hated Shelton, and this was why she had been so closely observing his actions.

Perhaps this accounted for the change in her attitude toward Marian—a change which Marion had spoken of to Seal.

She had fallen violently in love with Seal Shelton soon after his appearance at Rogue River Ranch, but had had sufficient self-control and reserve to bide the fact from him;—and hide it, also, from Marian. Therefore it was with a pang whose poignancy was bitter as death that she beheld the growing intimacy between Seal and Marian.

She had brooded on this night and day, and it was now beginning to tell on her.

The climax was reached, when, one night, Marian's words and manner brought the revelation that Seal had asked her to be his wife. She had felt she could endure many things; but not that!

She choked down her emotions and left the room. Her brain was on fire. She clutched her throat as if it burned her, and pressed a hand against her heart as if to still its tumultuous throbbing.

For her, life suddenly lost its joy. She had feared this, had felt that it must and would come in time, and yet had never self-confessed the fearful truth.

"Oh! what shall I do?" she cried, looking appealingly up at the quiet and peaceful stars. "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She took no note of the direction in which she walked, but strode on with a heedless pace that carried her swiftly in the direction of the turbulent river.

She started when she drew near its banks and heard the roar of the tumbling water. A ghastly look came into her face. It held the thought of suicide.

Here was a surcease from all trouble and disappointment. Here was balm for the wounded and broken heart.

"Father, forgive me for my sin!" she cried, looking heavenward with uplifted hands.

"Father, forgive me! Forgive me!"

The appeal ended in an incoherent cry.

"Oh, God, is this murder, too?"

She glanced back toward the house. It was invisible from that point. Then she looked again at the wildly-rushing river.

It seemed to beckon her on. The white foam upraised itself against the rocks like white, welcoming hands. The gurgle of the current seemed musical, even entrancing. The hollow, black depths whispered of infinite peace and rest.

"Father, forgive me for this—this murder!" she again prayed.

Then once more uplifting her hands she ran quickly toward the stream.

She was about to hurl herself in when a man stepped from behind one of the bushes, caught her by the dress and dragged her violently back.

It was Tom Conner.

"Heavens! if it ain't Sylvy! This beats my time. Have you gone clean crazy, girl?"

She sunk sobbing on the wet rocks.

"I am crazy!" she moaned. "Oh, why did you save me from that, Tom Conner? I'm not fit to live. I don't want to live."

"Best way in the world to please your enemies is to go drown yourself!" was his keen and sententious exclamation.

Tom Conner was far from being a fool, whatever else he might be. He had seen that Sylvia Sterling was in love with Seal Shelton, and he rightly guessed that this attempt at self-destruction had its cause in that.

"Never please your enemies that way. I'd 'a' been dead long ago, if I'd followed that plan. I live to circumvent 'em; to thwart 'em; to trip 'em up in their schemes; to kill 'em, if need be! But I don't go and kill myself. Nary! That's a fool's way. And you ain't no fool; though you've been acting precious like one!"

She stared at him dazedly. New ideas were creeping into her mind. Was Tom Conner right and she wrong? Why should she kill herself? Why indeed? That would not injure these enemies of hers. Perhaps they would not even feel sorry.

Yes; they were enemies! She felt that! Had

they not injured her irretrievably? Would friends do that? No; she would not die! She would live! She would revenge herself for the injury done her. She would be revenged on him, and on her!

But her brain was whirling so that she could hardly think. All things seemed part of a vision—part of a hideous nightmare. Was she here on the brink of Rogue River, and was that Tom Conner sitting over there looking at her so steadily?

"What did you say?" she faltered. "I believe you said something."

"I did!" said Conner; and then he began to repeat slowly and with emphasis what he had already given utterance to.

"You are right!" she declared, rising and coming nearer to him. "You are right. There is something to live for. Can you guess what it is? It's revenge, Tom Conner! Revenge!"

"Correct you are!" and he nodded, pleasedly.

"Revenge!" she repeated. "Revenge! Revenge!"

Hardened as he was, Conner drew back, shudderingly. He fancied he saw in her actions and words symptoms of insanity. He had asked her if she was crazy, and now he was beginning to think she was.

"Get even with your enemies and take care of yourself! That's always my doctrine: and I've found it to work pretty well. There's a deal of satisfaction in it."

"That's what I want to do!" she hysterically declared. "I don't want to throw myself in there, now. I should have done it, though, but for you. You saved me from that, Tom Conner; and—you put new ideas into my head."

She stopped, hesitatingly, and drew something from her pocket.

"I want to pay you for that, and for the work I want you to do."

There was a white, fierce rigidity in her manner, a metallic click in her voice, and a maniacal poise of the head that made Conner shudder again.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"Will you do what I want you to? Answer me that. You hate Seal Shelton. You needn't try to deny it. I've read it in your face as plainly as if it had been written there. Have you courage enough to—to—"

Her voice broke, the words died in a hollow gurgle, and her fingers worked convulsively.

Conner looked quickly about to make sure they were quite alone. The place was deserted, forbidding, and almost dark.

"I expect to do him up sooner or later!" he hissed. "Him and that infernal High-Kicker both!"

"Take that, then!" and she thrust into his hand the object she had taken from her pocket.

"It will pay you for saving me from the river, and—and—"

She turned abruptly away, ran wildly up the slope as if pursued by invisible demons, and disappeared. A low moaning cry came back to Conner as she vanished.

"Hanged if that don't beat me!" Conner cried, in great amazement. "She's a she-devil, or she's a maniac! If she ain't a maniac, she will be one in side of a month, or I miss my guess. She's got it in for Seal Shelton. Yes; and for that sweetheart of his. It's the first time I ever saw a girl go plum crazy over a love affair."

He struck a match and looked at the object he held in his hand. The daylight had not entirely faded, but he wanted to give it a closer examination than was possible by the light that yet lingered in the sky.

He whistled his astonishment. She had spoken of pay. He held in his hand a roll of money. Several of the bills were of rather large denominations. Two of them were—yes; two of them were counterfeits. Tom Conner knew a counterfeit when he saw it. He could not mistake these counterfeits, anyway. He had helped to make them.

And what was that?

He struck another match and looked again. One of the bills—not one of the counterfeits—had a dark, red stain on it. It was the stain of blood!

Conner's astonishment was open-mouthed and genuine. He could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Where did Sylvy Sterling get this money?" he questioned, unconsciously speaking aloud in his excitement. "This was Jim Carlow's money! I reckon if anybody ought to know that much, it's me! Them counterfeits tell the tale."

He was manifestly startled, if not dismayed. He looked again at the bills to make sure he

was not dreaming. Then he thrust them in his pocket; and turned and walked in the direction which Sylvia had taken.

CHAPTER X.

THE ROSTER OF ROGUES.

"THIS hyer's what I calls slick!"

The High-Kicker from Killbuck clung prostrate to the wet soil and squeezed himself into as small a compass as possible.

All about was dark as Erebus—except at one point. That was in the direction toward which Kirby's head was thrust. A very faint light burned there—a mere yellowish speck in the intense gloom.

He was in an underground "drift" or tunnel, and the speck-like light yellowed the air of a larger area. This area seemed to have cave-like proportions, so far as he could judge. Doubtless, it was walled or boarded up, for the tunnel in which he lay was timber-braced.

He was in an exultant mood. He had directed his principal efforts since coming to Rogue River Ranch to the work of unearthing the counterfeiters. He had paid more or less attention to the mystery clinging about the death of Jim Carlow; but that was only a side issue. He had been sent there on a special mission, and that mission had been ever uppermost in his thoughts.

It was in this that the High-Kicker differed from his assistant, Seal Shelton. Shelton had fallen desperately in love, and was now devoting more of his energies to the discovery of Jim Carlow's murderer than to the task that had brought him there.

"If this hyer ain't the place I've been lookin' fer all these days, then I'm a measly Mexican! The very identical place! Sing'lar I never thought o' it afore, too. I might 'a' knowed they'd have a den like this hyer, an' common sense would 'a' tol' me to look fer it whur it was least to be expected."

The place in which he lay was a "drift," leading from an abandoned mining shaft. The shaft had been sunk in a rocky draw only a short distance from the ranch buildings. Valuable mineral was expected to be found. That was the reason given for its sinking, at least; though Kent Kirby was now convinced it was not the real reason.

No mineral had been found, and after making some drifts and excavations, the work had been abandoned.

That was four or five years before, and the mine had lain deserted and unnoticed, or apparently so, ever since. Weeds and bushes had grown about the mouth of the shaft. The hoisting frame and timbers had been taken away, and all had been given over to neglect and decay.

Some boards had been thrown across the gaping mouth to prevent stray cattle or ponies from tumbling in.

Kent Kirby had passed the old shaft many a time, and had seen it; but there had been nothing about it to suggest evil use, or hint that it was a lie.

Now, he unjustly accused himself of mole-like blindness and a lack of every requisite going to make a shrewd detective.

He was sure that no hope of finding mineral had ever been held by the men who had opened the pretended mine. They had another purpose in view. That purpose was to prepare a place where secret meetings could be held and secret work carried on with little danger of discovery.

But for a word or two dropped by a drunken cowboy, the High-Kicker might have forever remained in ignorance of this.

So far, he was certain none of the cowboys, or people of the ranch, had any inkling of his true character. To them he was the rip-roaring High-Kicker from Killbuck, the man of capacious mouth and loud words, whom the freakish fancy of a girl had elevated to the position of foreman.

He had played his part well; much better than Seal Shelton had played his. If he could continue this success, the doors of information must eventually open wide to him.

He chuckled gleefully, as he squeezed his body closer and closer against the wet wall. Some of the bracing timber had rotted away at that point, leaving a niche-like burrow into whose narrow confines he was trying to press himself.

He accomplished this to his satisfaction, after awhile, though the place was contracted and sufficiently tight to cramp him. But it gave him security; and with his head poked from the niche, like the head of a tortoise from its shell, he watched the illuminated space beyond the

with eyes that glittered with suppressed excitement.

Only a short distance separated him from the artificial cavern, and he could see and hear with tolerable certainty what was occurring and being said.

A number of men were within the cave—a half-dozen, at least—and one of them was Tom Conner, the ex-foreman.

Kirby had descended the shaft, after witnessing these men vanish into its capacious mouth. Then he had felt about in the gloom until he had found the drift, and had crawled along the wet and winding passage until the light appeared.

No securer place could be found anywhere for the consummation of criminal deeds. It was not possible for the light to penetrate to the bottom of the shaft and be there seen by any one, even if so unlikely a thing as a watcher should chance to be standing above and looking down into the hole.

The High-Kicker had no more than got himself well settled in the cramped aperture, than he heard a slight noise in the direction of the shaft: this showing that some other member of the band was approaching.

The man passed so near that Kirby could have touched him with his extended hand. The gloom was so great, though, that he could not tell who the fellow was until the latter had entered the circle of light.

He saw, then, that it was the cowboy whose drunken lack of caution had set him to searching for this place.

What the cowboy had said was the merest hint—and was doubtless thrown out as a feeler; he thinking, probably, that the High-Kicker would desire to become a member of the band, should its existence be made known to him.

"I'll have to cultivate yer acquaintance, Jerry!" and the High-Kicker thrust out his tongue in a knowing way. "Yer head's full uv facts an' ideas that 'ud be val'ble to me. Who knows but that I may become one o' ye, yit? I've done stranger things in my time. The High-Kicker makin' an' shovin' o' the queer! Waugh! I reckon I'll have to think about that!"

The little band was greeting Jerry with a subdued uproariousness that was suggestive. Were they always so cautious, or did they feel that they had special need of care at this time?

This was the question Kent Kirby asked himself, and which found no adequate reply.

The yellow flame of the lamp was turned a little higher; and Kent Kirby could see that the business which had drawn them together was to be at once taken up. They had evidently been awaiting Jerry's coming.

The detective watched them with shining-eyed interest. He knew he saw before him the members of the band of counterfeiters, of whom he believed Jim Carlow to have been the head.

Tom Conner's words furnished what seemed convincing proof of this.

"I run onto a little more of the queer that the old man throwed around so lively!" he said, with quiet emphasis, producing and exhibiting a small roll of bills.

It was the roll Sylvia Sterling had given him.

He held up the counterfeits.

"Did some feller do ye up by passin' 'em onto ye?" one of the men asked.

"No. I'll tell ye how I come by 'em, after awhile. Jist now, we've got other business. I've kept my hawk-like optics on this infernal Seal Shelton, and I think I've seen enough to prove he's what we have thought."

He had shoved the bills into his pocket; and now took a seat before the rough table that rested in the center of the cave.

The others had already grouped themselves in chairs about the table. On it the lamp was resting.

"Seal Shelton, eh?" and the tortoise-like head of the High-Kicker was pushed still further out into the drift. "This hyer's growin' as interestin' as a fairy tale. An' some o' the 'queer's' been comin' back! I should think it might; the country's full enough uv it. About every other dollar you run ag'in' in this section is bogus!"

"Do you know, I believe that Shelton is the very chap that done up the old man!" and Tom Conner swept the circle of excited faces with burning glance.

"If I wusn't so dead shore that Mary Ann Carlow was at the bottom o' that job, I'd believe that my eyes was a-lookin' at that chap this very minute."

As he muttered this, the High-Kicker was staring with eager intentness into Tom Conner's glowing face.

"I'm pretty sure of it," Conner continued,

still referring to the murder and Seal Shelton's supposed connection with the dead. "But setting all that aside, we've got enough ag'in' him to warrant us in doing him up."

"Ay! Ay!" came from the angry group.

"Gittin' interestin'er an' interestin'er!" and the High-Kicker stretched further out into the drift. "We'll be havin' a regular circus d'rec'ly, with Tom Conner fer ringmaster—an'—an' your humble servant fer clown. Go in, band wagon! I'm after ye! The closter I kin git to the music, the better I'm pleased!"

He was craning his neck almost recklessly in his effort to hear and see everything.

"Shelton has come here for the express purpose of ferretin' us out and causing our arrest."

"K'rect ye air!" and Kirby set down mentally the names of all within the cave. "He'll not go back empty-handed. Leastways, I'll not; for I don't think I'm fool enough to let any purty woman lead me around by the proboskis an' make me fergit my biz. I think I've got the roster of this hyer comp'ny all sot down in the note-book up in my head, an' it'll be harder to rub out than indelible ink."

He was so pleased, and his smile so expansive, that any one seeing his face would have been forced to laugh outright.

"You know what we do with such cattle?" Conner continued; at the same time tearing some bits of paper and passing them to the men. "If the old man was still alive, he wouldn't go through any such form as this, but I don't like to take all the responsibility. You'll put down on those slips of paper your verdict; and then we shall see what we shall see."

The faces were threatening and ominous, as they bent over the bits of paper while the fingers painfully traced awkward characters. For a minute a silence reigned that could be almost felt. Then, there was a shuffling as the papers were gathered up and tossed into a hat.

"Take 'em out an' read 'em, Jerry!" and Conner pushed the hat across the table.

Jerry Cavanaugh, the cowboy, drew out the papers one by one and slowly and impressively read what was written on them:

"Death!"

"Death!"

"The knife!"

"Hang him!"

These and similar words fell from his lips.

There was not a vote in favor of clemency or mercy; not a vote to indicate that any man there doubted the guilt of Seal Shelton.

"I reckon Seal had better camp out in the woods to-night!" the High-Kicker muttered, anxiously, as he listened to the ominous reading of the vote. "This hyer climate is like to git mighty onhealthy for him."

"You have heard the verdict," Conner commented; "and I need hardly say I approve of it. We must show these minions of the law that they can't come about here! At the same time, we must work the thing carefully, so that no suspicion can arise against us."

A long discussion followed, and it was decided that Seal should be waylaid some dark night and shot.

A dozen bullets were thrown into a hat, one of them having been previously marked. Then the hat was once more passed around the table.

Each man carefully drew out a bullet. None of them were anxious for the nicked one.

They were examined by the dull light of the lamp; and it was seen that Tom Conner, himself, had drawn the fatal lead.

"It's all right, boys!" and he smiled grimly. "I've not hankered for the job; but you never knew me to shirk a plain duty. You can depend on me to attend to the matter!"

"What was that?"

One of the cowboys turned excitedly toward the drift.

The High-Kicker had become incautious through his intense anxiety to hear and see all; and in squeezing still further forward, had dislodged a rotten board.

CHAPTER XI. IN DEADLY PERIL.

KIRBY was a man of rare courage, but a sudden thrill of fear shot through him. He knew that his death would result, should he be caught there spying on these men.

He hesitated for an instant, uncertain what course to pursue. The rascals within the cave were listening now with strained ears to any sound that might come from the direction of the shaft or the tunnel. He knew it would be almost impossible to rise to his feet and glide away without being heard, and it seemed foolhardy to remain where he was, or even in the niche.

No doubt a search of the shaft and drift would soon be instituted, when he could hardly escape detection.

Tom Conner settled the question by striding toward the drift with drawn revolver.

The High-Kicker was about to rise and trust to his heels for safety, but was checked by a noise that came unmistakably from the shaft. Some one was entering from that direction.

He could do nothing but crouch closer to the moist earth and work himself quickly back into the niche. Here was a new complication, which might bring disastrous results.

Tom Conner hurried into the drift and advanced cautiously along it, with his revolver held ready for use.

A low curse and a half fall came from the end toward the shaft. The new-comer had stumbled over an obstruction.

The ex-foreman was very near the niche where lay the concealed detective, and the latter could hear him give a sigh of relief and at the same time mutter an anathema against the clumsy intruder.

"Is it you, Shorty?" Conner anxiously called. Shorty answered with an outburst of drunken rage.

"Why in Sam Hill don't you keep things clear down hyer? Do you expect a man to have the eyes of a bat? I do b'lieve I've gone an' broke my leg!"

"Come on in, and shut your yawping!" was Conner's angry command. "You'll bring the officers down on us!"

"Off'cers be-e b-blowed!" declared Shorty. "Wh-who's afeared uv the off'cers? Show me an off'cer an' I'll p-pulverize him!"

He squared off and delivered Conner a drunken blow that sent the latter reeling against the wall and extinguished the lamp.

"Now's my time!" the High-Kicker whispered. "I'd better slide right now. This hyer comin' uv Shorty has throwed e'm off the trail fer a minute, but they're purty shore to pick it up again. Yes, I reckon I'd better dig out while I kin!"

Proof that he was right in this was even then forthcoming. Excited and angry questions were being hurled at the intoxicated man, and his replies tended to show he could not have caused the noise which had been heard in the drift.

Conner, after a wrathful adjuration, was again advancing with the re-lighted lamp.

Kirby was on his feet by this time, and sneaking with all caution toward the shaft.

Conner was flashing the dull, yellow light on the walls and recesses as he advanced.

"Ah! what's this?" the High-Kicker heard him exclaim.

Conner had reached the point where the rotten board had been dislodged, and was now staring at it.

Those within the cave hurried to where he was, when they saw him stop.

"There's something wrong here!" Conner cried, stooping to look at the board. "That never fell down here accidentally. There's been some one in here! Boys, Seal Shelton has been in here!"

He set down the lamp and bounded nimbly toward the shaft, which Kent Kirby was at that moment entering.

The High-Kicker heard him coming, and, dropping all his precautions as now useless, he leaped to the ladder that clung to the sides of the well-like opening and scrambled in all haste to the top.

The ladder was a rickety affair. It had been in use a long while and had never been repaired. To have ventured to repair it, except in the most secret and stealthy fashion, would have been to call attention to the old shaft, and this was just what was not wanted.

Notwithstanding its shaky and treacherous character, Kent Kirby went up the ladder at a double-quick; and, when the top was gained, threw himself headlong into the weeds at the side of the mouth of the mine.

As he vanished over the edge of the shaft, a revolver cracked in the depths below and a bullet whizzed upward close at his heels.

The shot was fired by Tom Conner.

Conner had not been quick enough to see who the intruder was; but he had caught a glimpse of vanishing heels, and at these he had sent the shot.

"Phew!" and the High-Kicker climbed to his feet and sped recklessly away into the gloom. "That was a narrer squeeze! Too narrer by half fer comfort!"

He could hear the sounds of subdued voices at the bottom of the shaft, and hear the shaking of

the ladder as some of the men sprung to mount it.

"Don't let him git away, boys!" he heard Conner command. "He has seen too much for our good."

The High-Kicker was aware that Conner thought the interloper and spy none other than Seal Shelton; and so he ran with all speed to the house for the purpose of warning Seal of the peril that threatened, and to urge him to get out of the way of it.

He gained the grounds about the ranch buildings before Conner's men cleared the mouth of the mine.

"Seal! Seal!" he called, rushing into the bunk-room, where he thought Shelton might be sleeping.

Seal was not there. Neither was he at the house.

"Lordy!" and the sweat of anxiety poured from the High-Kicker's face. "He's out walkin' with that gal, and he'll be killed 'fore I kin git to speak to him."

He knew not what to do; and while he hesitated, and could hear the tread of the advancing men, he beheld Marian Carlow enter the house.

She was alone. If she had been out walking with Seal, he was not to be seen now.

Sure of this, and feeling somewhat relieved because of it, Kirby sped out toward the river trail; and there creeping into a tangle of high grass, concealed himself from the search of Conner's followers. He did this, hoping to see Seal as the latter returned from the river, whither he frequently went.

But when Seal did not come, and nothing could be seen of him, nor could his advance along the trail be detected, Kirby boldly returned back to the bunk-room.

"Hello!" he said, in seeming wide-mouthed amazement, as he saw Conner and others anxiously grouped about the room, which they had been searching. "Whatever under the canopy is up? I heered the blamest yow-yowin' and clatterin' an' goin' on awhile ago, that my mortal years ever lit on. Come from the direction uv the ole mine! Must be a catamount tackled a steer down there."

"I run down that away, but I couldn't see a thing. Mebbe you fellers kin explainify! If you kin, do it quick, fer I'm a-bu'stin' to know what made that unairthly racket."

"One of the boys with a little too much tanglefoot aboard!" Conner dryly commented. "That was all. He tackled me, and let out a screech or two, and I had to down him. He's in his bunk over there. It was Shorty."

He pointed to the cot into which this drunken member of the gang had been tumbled.

The explanation seemed amply sufficient, and Kirby turned away without further questions.

He had no thought of retiring, however. On the contrary, he again went out on the river trail; and for an hour or more watched and waited in vain for the coming of Seal Shelton.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SCENE ON THE CLIFF.

SHELTON did not return; nor was he to be found next morning.

In following out his pretense of being in the vicinity on a hunting trip, Shelton frequently absented himself from the ranch. He had not done so recently, however, owing to the presence of Marian.

The only other explanation of his continued absence which seemed to throw light on the subject was the horrible supposition that some member of the band of counterfeiters had encountered him on one of the lonely trails and had there slain him.

Kirby knew they had searched for him all through the night; for he had heard them moving about through the gloom like panthers in stealthy pursuit of prey.

Marian was to be seen in the house that morning, and Kirby was more than once on the point of entering for the purpose of questioning her. He hesitated to do so; and finally went out on the range, to look after some work that needed attention.

This called him again in the direction of Rogue River.

He had much to think about that morning. The revelations of the previous night furnished abundant food for thought.

He thought, too, of Marian, as he rode slowly riverward.

From the first, almost, he had believed her guilty of the terrible crime of murder, and Seal's infatuation had distressed and pained him.

When yet a considerable distance from the

cliffs which backed Rogue River on the west, he was surprised and startled by the sight which his upward glance encountered.

Two men were struggling on the face of the rock, now bald, bare and desolate-looking from the effects of the fire. They were struggling, too, for life; each striving to hurl the other from the dizzy height into the boiling torrent.

Kent Kirby gave a gasp of dismay, and drew in his horse so sharply that it was thrown on its haunches. His lips moved, but for a second no words issued from them. The pupils of his eyes dilated and his face contracted in a sudden spasm of pain.

"Seal Shelton an' Tom Conner, by the great horned frog of Texas!" he at length managed to ejaculate. "Both on 'um up there a-wrestlin' to the death like a pair uv p'izen grizzlies!"

He was not near enough to discern the features of the men, but he felt sure he was not mistaken in this semi-guess at their identity. Of Tom Conner he was positive, for Conner always wore a peculiar shaped sombrero; and this was now pushed far back on his head and was in momentary danger of being knocked off.

How Seal and Conner chanced to be on that particular ledge engaged in such a combat was something of a mystery. He could not fail, however, to recall the fact that to Conner had been delegated the slaying of this hated foe of the Rogue River band of counterfeiters. Only a few hours before Conner had drawn the nicked bullet which singled him out as the man to kill Seal Shelton.

A secret, stealthy shot from ambush had been the method chosen, but circumstances had probably decided Conner to make an open and bold assault. Perhaps he had tried the stealthy method, and had been discovered and forced into the fight which Kirby now witnessed.

All these things flitted through the mind of the redoubtable High-Kicker.

With a yell of fear and rage Kirby plunged the spurs into the flanks of his broncho. The yell was intended to reach the combatants on the distant cliff; to inspire Shelton with renewed courage and energy and to dismay and weaken his adversary.

The lithe broncho shot forward with incredible speed, urged into madness by the galling spurs. Its first bound was so terrific that it would have unseated any but the most experienced of riders.

Kirby drew his revolver and swung it above his head and yelled again, like an iron-throated demon.

"Hold him to it, boy, till I git there! Hold him to it! Keep yer heels suckin' the rocks as if they was glued thar. Don't let him h'ist yel! Don't let him git ye off'n your pins! Stay with him! Stay with him! The High-Kicker from Killbuck is a-comin' like a runaway cog-train a-slidin' down Pike's Peak!"

Almost every sentence was punctuated and emphasized by such a yell as only the High-Kicker from Killbuck could emit.

But these frantic outcries and the phenomenal speed of the broncho availed nothing.

Even while Kent Kirby swung his revolver and uttered his yells he saw Tom Conner lift Seal Shelton bodily and hurl him by main strength from the top of the high cliff.

Down, down, with dizzying velocity dropped the form of the unfortunate man, disappearing almost instantly in the racing, green waters of Rogue River. A faint, far cry of despair reached Kirby; a cry that seemed the last wail of a lost soul.

Kirby involuntarily drew in the broncho; and reeled, sick and faint, in the saddle.

"My God!" broke from his pallid lips. "Conner's killed him. This is terrible! Terrible!"

All power of movement had suddenly forsaken him.

With an effort he recovered and again mercilessly spurred on the broncho. This time he did not swing the big revolver; but sat almost motionless in the saddle, his ashy lips muttering maledictions on Seal Shelton's murderer.

His eyes were fixed in a baleful glare on the cliff whereon stood Tom Conner. There was a murderous fury in that glare and Conner's life would have been short if the High-Kicker could have reached him at that moment.

Presumably Conner saw Kent Kirby's furious advance. At any rate he sprung backward from the face of the cliff, darted across the blackened slope, and disappeared amid the rocks beyond.

The High-Kicker gave a howl of baffled fury and spurred the broncho into a still quicker gait.

He was nearing the river, now, and his eyes

began to search the swirling surface. He could scarcely hope that Seal Shelton had escaped death. Still he did hope, and ran his glances up and down the uneven banks and into every likely nook and cranny where Seal might possibly be clinging.

He was frantically excited and panting.

"Ten thousand cusses on him!" he growled, referring to Conner. "May ten thousand hissin' devils bear him down to the deepest hell! May he pull hemp till his neck is stretched clean from this hyer airth to the moon! May he—"

The violence of his outburst choked him, and while the lips continued to move the bitter words remained unuttered.

Again he searched the river and the shores with his devouring, hungry eyes. The current rushed and roared as if in gleeful joy over the tragedy that had been committed. It seemed to mock and defy the impotent horseman now charging in wild wrath along the flinty decline. It flung up foam-flecked and white arms as if in taunting derision; as if flaunting in his face man's weakness and its own majestic strength. No sign of life anywhere greeted his gaze. On all the stream's torn surface there was nowhere a bobbing, black speck indicative of the head of an exhausted swimmer.

The High-Kicker licked his hot, parched lips and again urged on the broncho. His bright, glassy eyes continued their roving search.

But it was all in vain. The man, hurled from the cliff, had apparently sunk, never to rise again.

It was a fate not to be wondered at. The fall was terrific; and after the shock of such a descent there was little chance that any save the most expert of swimmers could reach either shore.

Still there were worn hollows in the banks, many of them brush-covered and hidden with grasses. He dismounted from the broncho and made a careful search of these on that side of the stream. The search was utterly barren of results. He had not expected it to be anything else.

The waters of Rogue River had the evil reputation of forever retaining within their grasp the bodies of the drowned. Nevertheless he again bestrode the broncho and rode on down the stream, narrowly scrutinizing every inch of the way. This search was also fruitless.

He was sure, now, that he should never again see Seal Shelton; and he groaned aloud in his despair.

"That coyote-minded Tom Conner will pay for this hyer!" and there was a fearful menace in his voice as his gaze again sought the overhanging cliff. "He's a fool if he thinks he kin play a trick like this, an' not have to reckon with me fer it. It's a mighty onlucky thing fer him that he hain't sized me up yit. 'Fore he gits through with this hyer bizness he'll 'low I'm the most cantankerous catamount that ever gripped his trail!"

This was not said boastfully, but was merely the expression of the vengeful resolve that then moved him.

Having thoroughly satisfied himself that Seal Shelton was not to be found, living or dead, he sought the most convenient fording place and lashed the broncho recklessly into the flood. It was a perilous swim; but under Kirby's deft guidance the broncho succeeded after a fierce struggle in gaining the opposite shore.

Here Kirby left it tied to a tree, and laboriously climbed to the top of the mesa. From this point he went back to where the struggle had occurred on the cliff and there took up Tom Conner's trail.

The trail was an easy one to follow across the cinder-strewn slope, but when the rocky district beyond was reached all indications vanished. Kirby was a good trailer and he was animated by the zeal of an unquenchable hate; but he was finally forced to give up in despair. Beyond a certain point Conner's footsteps could not be followed.

"Blast his picter, he seen me comin', an' he knowed that to leave his hoof-marks on these hyer ledges 'u'd be about the onhealthiest thing he could do. But he'll find that I'm not to be shook off like a no-count yaller dog on a rabbit trail. 'He'll learn what it is to have the High-Kicker frum Killbuck a-beaglein' him!"

Although he turned back toward the river, baffled for the time, he was resolved to even scores with Tom Conner before the end of the week, if he had to drop everything else to do it.

In this mood he again sought his broncho; and having forced the animal to again brave the current, set out for the ranch buildings, convinced that it was useless to waste further time on the margin of Rogue River.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

ALTHOUGH he had no great faith in Marian Carlow, as the reader knows—believing her to be guilty of the murder of her father—he decided to acquaint her with what he had that morning witnessed.

It would be a great shock to her. He could not doubt that; for, whatever her faults and sins, he was sure she sincerely loved Seal Shelton.

Hence it would be no difficult thing to secure her as an ally in his plans of vengeance against the ex-foreman. He knew she would willingly aid him in this to the extent of her power; and as the proprietress of the Rogue River Ranch, her power and influence in such a matter would be far-reaching.

With this thought in his mind he tied the broncho to a hitching-post near the corral and went into the house.

He encountered Sylvia Sterling on the threshold.

Sylvia was attired in a faded morning wrapper, and there was in her dress and manner a careless lack of regard he had not hitherto noticed. She seemed nervous and absent-minded, and drew back startledly when the sound of his footsteps reached her.

"Hain't seen nothin' of Tom Conner, this last half-hour, I reckon?" glancing keenly at her.

She shrunk under his words.

"Did you say Mr. Conner?" as if striving for time in which to collect her thoughts.

"I said Tom Conner! Ketch me a-misterin' him. I'd as soon think uv callin' a rattlesnake Jedgel!"

"I—I haven't seen anything of him!" she faltered, starting to turn away.

"I didn't reely 'low you had!" staring at her in perplexity. "But I thought I'd ask. I want to see Miss Carlow, a minute."

He was wondering what had occurred to so alter Sylvia's demeanor.

Could he have known of her recent conference with Conner, of her suicidal resolve, of her gift to him of money, her actions would have had ample explanation.

"Miss Carlow isn't here," was her reply.

"Where is she? I want to see her at onc't. I'm p'intedly in a big hurry about it."

He had removed his large hat and was bowing as civilly and gracefully as he could, his wide mouth distended in one of his most fetching grins.

"She isn't here, and I don't know where she is," she sharply answered.

His queries and his grinning presence were evidently distasteful.

"But she was hyer not long ago," he persisted. "I seen her with my own two eyes. If you'll be good enough to give me a tip as to whur I'm f'ble to find her I'll be everlastin' obleeged. A wink is as good as a kick, ye know!"

She turned on him fiercely.

"I don't know where she is and I don't care. She's gone. Run away with Seal Shelton, I suppose. I wish she was dead; and him, too! That's what I wish. I don't want you to bother me about her. I don't want to talk about her. There! you hear?"

She pushed the door to with a bang and disappeared, leaving the High-Kicker stupefied and speechless on the steps.

"Well, may I be blowed!" he finally ejaculated. "Hyers another mix I wasn't countin' on. That gal's as crazy and mad as a wet hen. It's a mistake to bring a good-lookin' young man on a trip like this hyer. Every blamed female from scullion to pianer-pounder falls heels over head in love with 'em, fu't jump! An' from that on you've got a reg'lar Kiowa ghost-dance on yer hands. I 'low it's a blessin' that I'm uncommon homely. If I was an Apollo Belvidery I reckon I'd have to give up my biz."

The smile had faded from his face and he heaved a ponderous sigh.

"Well, hyer goes fer luck. If that other female critter's in this house I'm goin' to find her. 'Tain't only a step from jealousy to tellin' lies. A jealous woman'll do things it would skeer a man to think about!"

He turned the knob of the door and stepped boldly into the hallway.

The house was apparently deserted. Sylvia Sterling had retreated probably into her private room.

Kirby was puzzled and annoyed. His mind was filled with thoughts of the recent scene on the river. Why, at this time, had Marian Carlow disappeared, when he was so anxious to see her? He had his hands full of mysteries. Was this the beginning of another one?

He called to Sylvia, and then to Marian; and when only the echoes of his own voice came back, he tramped up the stairway, bent on a personal investigation.

Sylvia met him in the upper corridor.

"Why have you followed me?" she spitefully demanded.

He did not reply, but stepped across the corridor and rapped on the door of Marian's room.

"I told you she was not here!"

With this snappish exclamation she slipped past him and threw the door open.

"Look for yourself, if you won't believe me!"

The room was vacant.

He saw she had spoken truly in saying Marian Carlow was not in the house.

"I'm p'intedly ag'in' a snag!" he avowed, beaming on her in spite of her belligerent attitude. "If you'd only help me! I want to have a little talk with her on a subject of importance. If you'll say where she's gone I'll take my cowhide boots out uv this hyer boudoir and not bother you furdur. But I mus' know where she gone."

"I'd tell you if I could!" and there was an air of candor in her tones. "I was out riding this morning, and when I returned Marian was not in the house. I think—I think—" and here, in spite of her efforts at self-control she became hysterical—"she's eloped with Seal Shelton!"

Kirby had the best reasons for disbelieving this, but he deemed it unwise to acquaint her with them. Long experience had taught him to be secretive. He knew not how far he could trust this woman.

So he turned away, descended the stairs, and went into the open air.

There was no one in sight. The cowboys were absent on the range and would not return before night—some of them perhaps not for days.

Remounting the broncho he made a circuit of the buildings, examining the adjacent prairie and the cottonwood grove. Nowhere were there any traces of Marian Carlow. On visiting the stable he found that her favorite riding pony was also gone.

As there was a likelihood that she might be enjoying a canter he remained in the vicinity of the ranch buildings for more than an hour, hoping that she might return. When she did not he turned his broncho in the direction of the town of Piebald and rode rapidly away.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN CONSULTATION WITH THE SHERIFF.

THE mysterious disappearance of Marian Carlow placed Kent Kirby in a peculiar position. It left him in sole charge of the ranch and the business connected therewith. Only a few days before several carloads of cattle had been shipped from the station at Piebald, and he knew that a draft for the money was now in the post-office there in a letter directed to him.

Although he had all along felt that Marian Carlow was not rightfully the person to whom this money should be paid, yet, in view of the fact that there was no one else claiming it, he had meant to turn it over to her. What was he to do with it now?

Perhaps, though, he was borrowing unnecessary trouble. She might have ridden over to Piebald; or she might soon return to the ranch. He settled the matter by resolving that, in the event of her continued absence, he would deposit the money in bank to the credit of Jim Carlow's lawful heirs; and let the courts decide who these were.

On visiting the office of Cassius Clay Colton, the sheriff, he found that that individual had neither seen nor heard of the missing girl.

This information came as a great disappointment, for Kirby had counted strongly on finding Marian in the town.

Colton could not say she was not there or had not been there; only that he had not seen her. However, as the sheriff was lynx-eyed in his detection of strangers and visitors, this seemed to the High-Kicker an equivalent to a denial that she had visited the place.

"Kin I have a little private talk with you?" he asked, glancing significantly at a group of loungers near the doorway.

"Cash" Colton caught the glance, and led the way to a little room at the rear of the building where they would be reasonably secure from espionage.

Kirby breathed freer when they were seated in this room with the door locked and bolted behind them. The place was illuminated by a skylight and there was no window for the benefit of an eavesdropping enemy.

"This hyer's hunk!" and the High-Kicker surveyed the place with an approving smile. "You had it built on purpose fer this p'tic'ler bizness, I s'pose?"

"I find it handy, sometimes. Now as to your business?"

Colton was sternly, almost icily quiet in his general demeanor; just the reverse of the redoubtable and guffawing High-Kicker from Killbuck. Yet each in his way was as determined and resolute as the other—as courageous, aggressive, and as full of fire and fight when the occasion demanded.

Kirby drew a slip of paper from an inner pocket, and held it in his hands as he entered on a recital of the events of the morning.

Colton listened with marked interest. He had always regarded Tom Conner as a dangerous and treacherous man, having never held for him the high esteem exhibited by many of the better citizens of Piebald. For that matter "Cash" Colton had never thought very well of the late Jim Carlow; although he had been wise enough to keep his tongue in his teeth, for Carlow had been a man of considerable political influence—and in the West as in the East political influence very frequently makes and unmakes the fortunes of office-seekers.

Colton's interest rose to fever pitch when Kirby handed him the bit of writing and pointed to the name thereon.

"That's what I calls the Roster uv Rogues. You'll find on there the names of as precious a set of scamps as ever straddled hoss-flesh. If hemp hain't a-growin' fer over' mother's son uv 'em, I'm off my base. They're the gang uv counterfeiters fer which you an' me have been huntin' these many long days. I've got the thing down fine an' know what I'm talkin' about."

"Ah!" and Colton drew in his breath with a soughing gasp.

"You'll see that I have headed the list with the name of Tom Conner. He's the king-pin of the round-up sence old Carlow passed in his checks. I don't think he'll die at the end uv a rope, fer I mean to shoot him as soon as I set eyes on him!"

"You're sure of these?" said the sheriff, looking at the names and unheeding this ebullition.

"I notice you have here some men of Piebald!"

"Can't help it. Bein' from Piebald hain't any better, I calk'late, than bein' from a boss of any other color!"

This struck the High-Kicker as so good a pun that he settled back in his seat and brayed his delight uproariously that he might easily have been heard in the street.

"Pretty good," said Colton, smiling dryly. "These were always shady fellows and I have suspected them for a long time. Now if you will be so kind as to tell me how you got these names and what proof you have on the subject, we'll talk the thing over and come to some conclusion."

Kirby needed no urging and immediately began a rehearsal of the exciting incidents of the previous night; disclosing what he had seen and heard in the depths of the abandoned mine. The names of the men of Piebald had been obtained at that time; not because they were then present, but because he had heard them mentioned as members and intimates.

Colton nodded approvingly. Such work as this always gained his warm admiration.

"I'm with you," he declared, rising as if he meant to go into the outer room. "I'll have twenty men ready inside of an hour. Likely there'll be another meeting of the band to-night. We'll surround the mine and capture every one of them. Then we'll rake in these Piebald fellows, if they should chance to be again absent."

"Hold on," said Kirby, plucking at Colton's sleeve. "I hain't ready fer this hyer biz yet. You're too previous."

"What do you want done?" Colton queried.

Thereupon Kirby more fully explained his plans. He desired Colton to watch the men of Piebald whose names were on the roster; and he especially wished Colton to arrest Tom Conner should the latter visit the town. Kirby feared Conner might attempt to leave the country by taking a train from that station.

When all this was arranged and Colton had promised to co-operate further with him in his efforts to bring the counterfeiters to justice, and in any manner he might mark out, Kirby wrung him warmly by the hand and took his departure.

CHAPTER XV.

KENT KIRBY'S GAME OF BLUFF.

A ROAR of anger came from the doorway of the bunk-room of the Rogue River Ranch.

Tom Conner, who had returned to the ranch and was at the moment sitting on one of the cots engaged in unpleasant thought, was aroused by this ominous outburst.

He arose and wheeled quickly, at the same time drawing his revolver. An instinctive feeling of peril swept over him. He shrunk back, however, as his gaze looked full into the deadly tube held in the hairy hand of the High-Kicker from Killbuck.

The latter was glowering at him and working his shaggy brows; and as that roar again came from the cavernous throat he seemed to the frightened Conner more like an enraged gorilla than a man.

Kirby had just returned from his visit to Piebald. He had scarcely expected to find Conner at the ranch buildings; but beholding Conner's pony tied near the corral, he had ridden behind the cottonwoods, left his broncho there, and had stealthily advanced to the bunk-room on foot.

Conner cowered and let his half-uplifted weapon drop at his side. He saw how foolhardy it would be to attempt a shot while covered by that deadly aim. The merest touch of Kirby's finger would be sufficient to send him to death.

"What do you want?" he asked, vainly attempting to assume an air of jocularly. "You're always at your tricks, Kirby. I can't say that it is funny, though, to stand here looking into that gun."

"You won't have the privilege of looking into it long, so you'd better set yer two eyes on it while you kin. I'm up to your little game, Conner. Fu'ist, before shootin' uv you—which I ought to do instanter—tell me why you toppled Seal Shelton off the cliff into Rogue River this morning. Tell me the truth, or so help me, I'll let daylight plum through you without fuder words!"

The look which came to Conner's face was one difficult to understand.

"You're off, Kirby! I swear to you that you are mistaken. I had a fight with a fellow on the cliff this morning, and I got the better of him and threw him into the river; but it wasn't Seal Shelton!"

Kent Kirby was a good reader of faces; and therefore he could not fail to notice the evident sincerity of the statement. Although staggered by it, he returned hotly to the charge.

"That won't do, you know, Conner. I seen the hull thing with these hwer two optics; and when I see a thing I see it! I saw you pitch him into the river, and it was Seal Shelton!"

"I'm willing to admit you thought it was, but all the same it wasn't. I'll admit, too, that I might have good cause for serving Shelton in that way. I don't say that I have, but I'll admit it just to please you."

"Who was it, then?" the High-Kicker impatiently thundered.

"There you have me. I don't know!"

"You don't know?" Kirby fairly howled. "That there's a likely yarn, that is!"

His manner once more became aggressive and the revolver which had been held in constant readiness, was again uplifted.

"I couldn't string a straighter yarn if I was to be hung for it. It's the solid truth, Kirby, I don't know who it was! To my knowledge I never saw the rascal before!"

The High-Kicker dropped his weapon and stared his bewilderment.

"Explain the tangle. Take the snarls out uv it as best ye kin!"

"Well, I was attacked on the cliff by an unknown man and forced to fight for my life. I got the better of him and threw him into the river. I suppose he went to the bottom. And that's all I know about it."

It was a seemingly unreasonable story; and when Kirby remembered how Conner had fled across the blackened waste and disappeared among the rocks, his doubts returned.

"Toss that pistol onto the cot over there and then I'll talk with ye about it."

Conner sullenly hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. He did not relish being ordered about by this man who had so recently been his inferior. Even yet, however, the thought did not enter his head that the bloviating High-Kicker was a detective.

"Now set down there comfort'ble like, fer I want to ask you a few questions."

He dropped into a squatting posture near the doorway and motioned Conner to a seat.

"I don't mind tellin' you that I can't swaller the hull ov what you've said. Still, I'll not shoot you—not jest yit—as I p'intedly meant to do. If I was shore it was Shelton you pitched from that cliff I'd settle with you right now. But

we'll let that pass. The truth will come out after awhile."

His eyes were blazing with suppressed excitement and his words came with a suggestive clicking sound that resembled the cocking of a weapon. Tom Conner shrunk back before the fire of his subdued anger.

"I'm a-goin' to talk to you about Jim Carlow! You was Carlow's foreman an' you knowed a good deal about him. I think you could give a good guess as to who killed him. That's my p'inted opinion! Hain't it yours?"

Conner shook his head negatively.

"I don't know anything about the case."

"Mebbe this 'll help your remembrancer!" again lifting the weapon.

If Conner had been given time to think he might have wondered at Kirby's too manifest interest in these matters. But he was not given time to think. The High-Kicker lashed him on with commands and interrogatories, emphasizing these with the threatening steel tube.

Conner equivocated and denied. This convinced Kirby that the ex-foreman was possessed of some knowledge on the subject, and he "bluffed" him into a confession.

"It's my opinion," and Conner's voice shook as he fumbled in his pocket for some object he wished to produce. "It's my opinion that Sylvie Sterling killed Jim Carlow!"

Kirby could not but be struck with the fact that this was the theory advanced by Shelton and Marian Carlow. It was a theory he had rejected as being groundless and overborne by evidence pointing in another direction.

"What gave you that idee?"

"This!" extending to him a small roll of bills. "Look at them; and when I tell you that they were given me by Sylvie Sterling, you'll be inclined to agree with me."

Kirby unfolded them and examined them with much curiosity. One of them was blood-stained.

In reply to Kirby's further questions Conner elaborated his reasons for believing in Sylvia's guilt. The chain of proof was sufficiently puzzling, but it did not shake the High-Kicker from his preconceived idea.

"I'll take charge of this bloody bill, with your permission, and then I'm a-goin' to carry you over to Piebald and deliver you to Cash Colton, to be held until I know whether or not you killed Seal."

Conner had hoped what he had done and said would gain favor in the eyes of Kirby and secure his release. He had good reasons for not wishing to fall into the hands of the sheriff. But his objections were so much wasted breath. Kirby held him silent with the threat of the revolver, and then deftly bound him with a lariat.

Having accomplished this, Kirby left the bunk room for the purpose of bringing forward his broncho.

As he emerged from the cottonwood grove on his return he gave vent to another roar of rage. It had abundant justification.

Sylvia Sterling had slipped from the house and released Conner; and the two were speeding across the prairie, mounted on a pair of the fleetest ponies to be procured from the corral.

On the impulse of the moment, Kirby threw himself into the saddle and gave chase; but he drew rein almost immediately. The attempt to overtake them would have been futile.

He dismounted and walked thoughtfully toward the corral. This act of Sylvia's disconcerted and bewildered him. He could find no ready reason for it. He did not believe she was in love with Conner. If she had known Conner thought her guilty of Jim Carlow's death she surely would have shrunk from thus extending him aid.

The ex-foreman had not told Kirby, however, of Sylvia's fit of jealousy, nor explained fully why she had transferred to him the money. More knowledge on this point might have assisted Kirby in getting at her true motives. But he had not this knowledge; and so stumbled about in the fog of doubt, like a desert-lost wanderer, constantly retreading the small circle of possibilities.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SENSATIONAL EPISODE.

THE Rev. Mr. Templeton, recently stationed in Piebald, started shiveringly from his couch, as there came a resounding knock upon the front door.

Piebald was a missionary station and he was the only minister in the town; and, for that matter, in the entire country.

The citizens of Piebald, while really honest and sincere and with kindest intentions, shocked and terrified him. They addressed him

familiarly as "Parson;" and one enthusiastic individual had even gone so far as to boisterously slap him on the back and wish him a net full of sinners at the first sweep of his seine.

In addition the men all wore rough clothing, and big hats, clanked jingling spurs and sported miniature cannon which they affectionately called "guns." In short, they were of the cowboy variety, as was to be expected of the inhabitants of a cattle town.

Mr. Templeton shivered whenever he thought of them, notwithstanding his intense desire to do them good. And now, as he lay awake at this extremely late hour and hearkened to that ominous thundering at the door, an icicle of the most frigid variety crept slowly from his head to his heels.

His first inclination was to remain quietly in bed and ignore the knocking; but when it became louder and more imperative, and he began to fear the door would be broken in, he hastily dressed and crept fearfully down-stairs.

"Don't be violent, please," he pleaded, in chattering tones. "Just one minute."

With this he applied a key and swung open the door, carefully screening himself behind it to avoid any chance bullets.

To his astonishment, instead of the rough mob he anticipated, he beheld a lady and gentleman, quietly and neatly dressed.

"I—I beg pardon!" he exclaimed, gliding from behind the door and advancing with outstretched hand. "Step right in. Your names—ah—"

He was holding a lamp above his head and its light now revealed to him a small concourse of people further back in the darkness.

These were not so prepossessing, but the invitation to enter had been extended and was being accepted by the lady and gentleman. He felt forced, therefore, to lead the way into the parlor, and arrange chairs for these unexpected guests.

A half-dozen cowboys trooped after, and ensconced themselves in the seats provided, after depositing their big, white hats carefully on the carpet.

The reverend gentleman was then informed that his visitors were Seal Shelton and Marian Carlow; that a license had been procured and they were candidates for matrimony; and that these cowboys had come to act as friendly witnesses of the ceremony.

If a woman ever looks handsome in her life it is when she stands before the marriage altar by the side of the man she loves. Marian Carlow, as she seated herself to await the actions of the Rev. Mr. Templeton, was not precisely before the marriage altar, but her pulses were fluttering quite as wildly and the roses bloomed quite as redly and sweetly on her cheeks.

At all times a handsome woman, she was, on this occasion, surpassingly and ravishingly beautiful. Although her attire had a generally sober and somber hue, yet she was tastefully dressed. The black ruche that encircled her throat gave to the skin an ivory whiteness by contrast. Her eyes shone like stars.

Seal Shelton, as he sat down beside her and bent on her an affectionate glance, was more wildly and madly in love with her than ever.

They felt they had abundant reasons for taking this sudden step. Seal had passionately urged it since the moment he had secured her promise to be his wife. She was alone in the world since the death of her reputed father, Jim Carlow. Not only that: one of the shrewdest detectives in the Southwest, Kent Kirby, the High-Kicker from Killbuck, believed her guilty of the murder and was industriously working to secure proofs against her.

Shelton's cheeks flamed and his heart grew hot with indignation whenever he thought of this. He mentally denounced Kirby as a crazy old fool, whom it was flattery to call a gentleman.

Kirby's theory of the murder had reared an almost impassable barrier between him and his former friend and ally. Shelton had almost grown to hate him. Because of the chain of circumstantial evidence, Kirby would ruin the life and forever blacken the name of this true-hearted woman.

This was the way Seal Shelton thought about it, and he waxed more and more furious as the days went by. He told himself he would never forgive Kirby for his persecution of Marian Carlow; forgetful of the fact that Kirby had whispered his belief to no one else, and instead of pursuing the clues furnished by the articles found in the old well, was devoting his entire time and energy to the work of unearthing the counterfeiters.

It is scarcely necessary to say that in all this Seal Shelton bitterly wronged his old-time friend. But when a man is desperately in love

he becomes an unreasonable creature. Suspicions and evidences light as thistle-down are magnified until they change into storm-clouds that shadow the whole sky.

Shelton had practically abandoned the work which had brought him to Rogue River Ranch. Just then, winning a wife was better than winning fortune and renown; better even than doing one's duty.

In urging Marian to an immediate marriage he had pointed out to her her need of a protector; her need of some one who would have authority to stand up in her behalf and fight down the black calumnies that were likely to be heaped on her devoted head. As her lover he could not well do this; but as her husband he could enter the lists for the purpose of opposing any and all who might array themselves against her.

His arguments and pleadings had won the day. Doubtless her own inclinations assisted the favorable decision; for she was as ardently attached to Seal Shelton as was he to her.

Of course Seal was not the man hurled from the cliff by Tom Conner. He had departed from Rogue River Ranch the night before, because of a warning brought him by Marian to whom it had been secretly conveyed by one of the cowboys.

Before leaving the ranch he had arranged with his sweetheart to meet him the next day at the residence of a friend, from whence it was agreed they should proceed to Piebald on the following night and be secretly married.

This friend and his cowboys were now the witnesses squatted in the minister's little parlor, and awaiting with eager impatience the Rev. Templeton's nervous movements.

When the reverend gentleman had assured himself that all things were regular and legal, he requested the candidates for matrimony to stand before him; and was proceeding with his usual brief lecture on the responsibilities and duties of the marriage relation, when there came a sudden and unwelcome interruption.

A quick step was heard in the hallway, the door was thrown open and a woman obtruded her presence on the company. Her dress was disordered, her eyes flashing and fiery, and her attitude one of intense and uncontrollable excitement.

"Beware what you are doing!" she shrieked, leveling her bony fore-finger at the expectant pair. "You will call down curses and ruin on your heads. Take the warning of one who knows you better than you know yourselves!"

"And you!—and you!" singling out Marian. "Think of the fate of Jim Carlow! Think of the fate of Jim Carlow!"

This ended in a wail that was so startling that every inmate of the room shivered.

As she uttered the last word she backed through the doorway and fled swiftly out into the darkness.

The parlor was instantly a scene of confusion. The ranchman and his cowboys started to their feet with looks of bewilderment, fear and dismay. The Rev. Mr. Templeton seemed temporarily paralyzed.

As for Marian Carlow, her over-wrought nerves could not endure the strain, and she sunk back into the arms of her would-be husband in a white and deathlike swoon.

One of the cowboys, more thoughtful than his fellows, ran to fetch some water; while the others, led by the ranchman, trooped out into the hall and into the gloom of the night to learn if possible, more of the strange creature who had created such a sensation.

She was not to be seen. Search and pursuit were alike useless; and as no one knew her they could only speculate vainly as to what it all meant.

Seal Shelton, bending over the still, white form of the woman he adored, bitterly cursed the old hag for her intrusion; and as bitterly cursed the High-Kicker from Killbuck. He did not know why he thought so, but like a rush it came to him that Kirby had been babbling of his suspicions, and that they had reached the ears of this intruder.

He did not stop to reason that it was not at all like Kirby to do such a thing. Of late he had begun to lay the blame of every mishap on the head of that long-suffering detective.

The effect of the water dashed freely in her face speedily restored Marian Carlow to a sense of her position and surroundings. Her lover supported her as she tremblingly arose. The cowboys re-entered the room and, except the staccow which hung almost palpably over all, there was nothing to prevent the continuance of the interrupted ceremony.

The minister's voice had a perceptible shake in it and Marian visibly shivered as she listened to

his words. Her ashy lips could scarcely formulate the monosyllabic replies; but it was all over at last; she was the wife of Seal Shelton, and leaning heavily on the arm of her newly-made husband, she turned to quit the room.

The cowboys stood respectfully and with heads uncovered until Marian and Seal had passed out. Then they followed for the purpose of tendering their assistance.

CHAPTER XVII.

SEAL SHELTON'S CHALLENGE.

KENT KIRBY was fumbling with a bit of writing which he had recently picked up when he was interrupted and startled by an angry exclamation.

The writing was in the penmanship of Marian Carlow, and Kirby had been poring over it long and intently.

Now he thrust it in a crumpled wad into his pocket and turned to face the owner of the wrathful voice.

He saw before him Seal Shelton, purple with rage, and with a hand dropped carelessly into a pocket. Kirby did not doubt that the hand held a revolver.

It was the day following that of the wedding at Piebald.

Seal Shelton, driven half insane by his ever-present fury, had ridden out from the little cattle-town for the purpose of a settlement with the man whom he now regarded as an enemy. His eyes gleamed balefully, and the veins on his forehead were swelled almost to bursting.

"I have come over to ask you to retract your slanders against Marian," he began, striving desperately to control himself. "She is my wife, now; and I feel that I have a right to make this demand. You will take back what you have said, or you will fight me. That is, if you're a man!"

The blank look of amazement on the High-Kicker's face gave way to one of imperturbable good-humor.

He clasped his hands to his sides, broke into a loud guffaw, and for a moment seemed bent double in an attempt to repress this unpardonable outburst.

"Haw! haw! haw! Ho! ho! ho! Hoo-ee!" the last long-drawn and whistling.

"Say that ag'in, younker! I can't think that my old years heerd aright. Take it back or fight ye! Why, dad gast ye, have ye plum fer-sook yer seven senses? I hain't got nothin' to take back, fer the very good reason that I hain't never breathed a word of that there bizness to any livin' soul but you!"

"Take it back or fight me!" Seal commanded, not in the least mollified. "I came here to get satisfaction for that and I'll have it!"

"Satisfaction be blowed!" with that same aggravating jollity. "Set down and be sensible. You couldn't hire me to fight ye, no way ye could put it. You're out uv yer head, right now, er you wouldn't think uv such a thing; an' a feller that's out uv his head hain't no wise responsible. I'd jes' as soon think uv fightin' a lunatic. Set down an' talk sensible!"

He motioned the angry man to an empty cracker-box, which was conveniently near.

Seal could not have told why he obeyed, but he took the indicated seat, feeling that he was a fool for not shooting Kirby on sight, as he had half resolved to do before reaching the ranch. He still gripped the revolver with nervous clutch, and closely eyed the man he had learned to hate.

"You are married, eh? I 'low it's the proper thing to congratulate you, even if I didn't receive an invite to the weddin'. You've got a smartish lookin' gal, Seal. Hyer's to hopin' you may trot well together in ther matrimonial harness. I wish ye the best o' luck; I do reely! Shake!"

He had dropped his levity and now advanced with outstretched hand.

Seal rather reluctantly loosened his hold of the revolver and placed his hand icily in that of the other. Heedless of this the High-Kicker wrung it with the fervid grip of a grizzly.

Then he stepped slowly and carefully backward and seated himself with great deliberation on the block he had vacated.

"I hain't throwed up on the pard bizness yet, if you have," he firmly declared. "An' in that line I'll ask you a question: Have you seen anything uv Tom Conner and Sylvie Sterlin'? Likely they've gone an' got married, too. One seems to breathe matrimony in the Rogue River air. The last I seen uv 'em they was a-scuddin' across the prairie over there, on the backs uv

two uv the best bronchos. Frum the trail uv dust they left they must 'a' felt bound to reach a minister in a hurry."

To Shelton this seemed levity.

"You're avoiding the point at issue," he reminded. "You do not take back what you said about Marian; and you refuse to fight me. I can't shoot you like a ward. What am I to think of this?"

The wide-mouthed smile came back to Kirby's homely face.

"That I'm the most onreasonable critter ye ever run against! That I'm a white-livered poltroon without nerve enough to bat my eyes at the sky. That I'm a A 1, first-water di'mund uv a fraud! Anything that you please. I've had hard words slung at me till my eperdermis is thicker'n a bull's hide. You kin fergit that I'm yer pard an' that we come to Rogue River on the same mission, if you want to. I'm the High-Kicker, but I hain't a-goin' to kick at anything you may do; not while you're off yer head as you be now. Come to me when you git the fire out uv yer blood!"

It was plainly impossible to fight or quarrel with this man. There is an old saying to the effect that two are necessary for anything of that kind.

Shelton sarcastically said as much.

"Right ye air, my boy. I won't fight ye ner I won't quarrel. It wouldn't settle the rights er wrongs uv anything fer us to stand up and bang away at each other with revolvers. Besides, I've got work to do and can't afford to be shot jist yit. An' they hain't no use riskin' makin' a widerder out'n that new wife."

Marian had been in his thoughts when Seal put in an appearance; and even now the words of the writing ran swiftly through his mind. However, he dared not show the paper to Seal.

It was evidently a leaf from Marian's diary, and this is what it contained:

"Date ——. Father and I quarreled this morning. It is not the first time. He is becoming very cruel to me. He threatens to disinherit me; and this after so long treating me as his child. It makes me desperate. I can't endure the disgrace of being thus cast off. I must prevent it."

Although Kirby had been assured by Conner that Seal Shelton was not hurled from the cliff, he had not been wholly able to believe this statement of Conner's; and therefore, had been considerably astonished as well as pleased when he beheld Seal alive and well, ever though the latter was threatening him.

He now spoke to Seal of what he had seen on the cliff.

Seal could throw no light on the subject; and the mystery seeming impenetrable Kirby turned from it to the counterfeiters.

"There hain't a soul but me on the ranch; aside frum yerself, of course. If you'll follow me into the old mine, and fergit yer mad a little while, I'll show ye something wuth lookin' at."

Shelton was at first undecided whether to or not to accept this invitation, but after a few questions he reluctantly followed Kirby to the mine.

A careful survey of the surrounding country was made before descending into its dark depths, for the place was likely to prove a bad trap should any of the band return while they were in there.

The descent and the examination were quickly made.

Kirby had ventured into the mine once before during the absence of the counterfeiters, and had been fortunate enough to discover their tools and dies, together with several finely executed engravings of bills and a quantity of the spurious money.

He had not touched anything; and he now simply pointed out to Seal these evidences of the guilt of the band.

When they had returned to the upper world he showed Seal the roster he had made; and then explained to him his plans to surprise and capture the counterfeiters that night.

This evidence of his good will and continued affection won so strongly on the recently irate man that he placed the challenge in abeyance, and agreed to assist the High-Kicker to the extent of his ability.

"I knowed you had the right stuff in ye, and that it 'ud come to the surface as soon as the fire went out of your head."

With this, he affectionately laid a hand on Seal's shoulder to more perfectly effect the reconciliation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RAKING IN THE ROGUES.

OUT from the gloomy shadows of the cottonwood grove into the shadows of the plain, that

were almost equally as black, a dozen or more men crept with the stealthy movements of cats.

They were an armed posse under the command of Cash Colton, and guided by Kent Kirby and Seal Shelton.

It was the night following the day which witnessed Shelton's wrathful outburst against his detective pard.

Shelton had sent word to his wife of what it was hoped might be accomplished that night, giving it as a reason for not immediately returning to her, as he had promised and greatly desired to do.

The same messenger had carried a request to Cash Colton from the High-Kicker; and had returned with the information that Tom Conner and Sylvia Sterling had ridden into Piebald that morning, and that Conner had been placed under arrest.

The half-crazed Sylvia had taken the first train for the East, vowing to forever shake from her feet the dust of the Rogue River region.

Sylvia had proven herself a very foolish and a very weak-headed girl. Shelton still believed in her guilt. Whether guilty or not she had permitted an insane jealousy to drive her to the verge of suicide and madness, to say nothing of her questionable semi-compact with Tom Conner; and now, with the memory of these things lashing her, she was foolishly flying from her own conscience. In such a race one can never hope to be a winner.

Kent Kirby uttered a warning hiss, and the men flattened themselves and remained motionless in the swaying grass.

A footstep had been heard in the direction of the mine. The rogues had been gathering for some time, and Kirby had thought all were collected in the cavern-like room, far below.

A moment served to show that the man was not entering the mine, but had come out of it. He advanced in the direction of the cottonwoods. Perhaps he was a guard or a spy, whose suspicions had been aroused by some unusual sound or rustle.

The unknown came close up to the prostrate men, peered toward the cottonwoods; then as silently retraced his way, disappearing finally in the gloom about the shaft.

There was something so singular and suggestive in this that Kirby whispered a few words to Colton, and then writhed away along the fellow's trail.

He had instructed Colton to advance his men slowly and with all caution, and form them in a cordon around the shaft of the mine.

This was to prevent the escape of any of the counterfeiters, should such an attempt be made.

For himself, he slipped to the well-like mouth and stared down into the gloom where the inquisitive guard had disappeared. He had heard a shaking of the old ladder and knew the guard had descended.

With a courage bordering on recklessness he let himself carefully over the rocky rim. He realized how perilous was the act. The guard, spy, or whatever the man was, might be standing in waiting below; in which event there was a likelihood that the foolhardy High-Kicker would get the benefit of a bullet.

Fortune favors the brave, and sometimes the reckless. That night the blind goddess seemed in a kindly mood. Kindly, at least, toward Kent Kirby.

Without mishap he reached the bottom of the shaft; and, finding it deserted, crept into the drift which led toward the large excavation.

At the elbow bend of the drift the dimly burning light came into view. It proceeded from the same oily, dirty lamp; and about the table the members of the band were grouped.

On the table were great heaps of coin and bank bills. These were being counted and laid into smaller piles. A division of the swag was evidently in progress.

Kirby hitched a little nearer and wedged himself partly into the niche that had previously given him shelter. Another of the rogues might descend from above, and this was a more secure place than the open passage.

The words which fell from the lips of the counterfeiters quickly told him that the arrest of Tom Conner had become known to them. In what manner was not revealed. But they were frightened because of it and had gathered there for the purpose of a division of their ill-gotten gains.

"Jist in the nick uv time," Kirby whispered, breathing very hard from his recent exertions. "Twas to-night er never!"

The rascals were planning to scatter on leaving the place, and to forever abandon the old scene of their operations. Another night and

Cash Colton's men would have raided only an empty nest.

Kirby retained his prostrate attitude for some time and until he felt that the time for action had arrived. Then he put out his foot and purposely dislodged a piece of rock from the wall of the drift.

"What was that?"

Shorty, the drunken cowboy whose timely coming had so signally aided Kirby on his previous visit to the cave, faced about and startledly asked the question.

At this the High-Kicker scrambled to his feet, making an unnecessary amount of noise in so doing, and slipped around the protecting elbow of rock.

"After him!" he heard, in a whispered chorus. Then there was a patter of feet as the excited rogues hurried pell-mell into the drift.

The lamp was extinguished whether purposely or not Kirby could not say.

Now that he had the rascals in full cry after him he ran with all speed for the bottom of the shaft, realizing that if his movements were not of the speediest he was likely to be stopped by a bullet.

He reached the ladder and scrambled up it with precipitate haste, and succeeded in gaining the top and hurling himself out into the weeds before his pursuers reached the bottom of the ladder.

From their excited exclamations he knew they held to the belief that the intruder was Seal Shelton; and it will be remembered that that was what they thought when Kirby penetrated into the drift the first time.

They were wild with rage, and determined to slay Shelton if they could lay their hands on him, notwithstanding that they expected to abandon the place immediately. They felt that he had seen and heard too much for their safety.

As the High-Kicker scrambled out of the weeds and darted away from the mouth of the mine, he cast a quick glance around him.

The shadows were dense, but he was sure that all the dark objects on which his gaze fell were not shadows. Many of them were men, and represented the silent cordon which Cash Colton had thrown about the place.

That the pursuing band might not take the alarm, or dream of the trap laid for them, he sped straight away in the direction of the horse-corral.

The rascals poured over the rim of the shaft in hot haste, filling the air with deep and low-voiced curses and starting in instant pursuit.

They had no sooner left the mouth of the shaft than they were made aware of the fowler's net into which they were running. Colton's men arose in a menacing circle, from which came the click! click! of rifle-locks and the stern command to surrender.

They stopped and huddled together in a frightened mob. The cordon closed with swift-ness and precision, and again the ominous command rung out on the night air.

Several of the entrapped villains fired their weapons wildly and made a blind dash for liberty. Others threw up their hands and sullenly awaited their fate.

The scene which ensued baffles description. There were shouts and yells, mingled with cries of pain. Clubs and guns were freely used. Several members of the posse fell back sorely hit. A few of the counterfeiters who refused to obey the command escaped by desperate dodging and running.

But it was all over within five minutes, and the rascals of Rogue River Ranch had been raked in by the nerry sheriff.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STARTLING EXPERIENCE.

WHILE these lively events were in progress, others quite as exciting were occurring at Piebald.

Mrs. Shelton had found kind and sympathetic friends in the little town. They had been well acquainted with Jim Carlow, and gave her welcome on his account. They had never dreamed that Carlow was the real head of the desperate band of counterfeiters who, it was said, had a haunt in the vicinity; and the information possessed by Kirby on this point had not yet been made public.

However, had these people known everything it would not have changed them in their attitude toward Marian.

She intended to return to the ranch in a few days and resume her residence there with Seal. But she did not desire to do so while Sylvia remained.

She was not pleased with the note sent her by

Seal from the ranch, stating that he meant to remain there with Kirby for the purpose of capturing some thieves.

Seal had not in all things taken her into his confidence. For one thing, he had never ventured to hint his dark suspicions against Jim Carlow, although she had told him Carlow was not her father.

She was not naturally of a timid disposition. Still, when she retired that night, she carefully locked the door of her room.

She had not wholly recovered from the nervous fright which the startling interruption to the wedding ceremony had given her. The old hag's screaming words, uttered so dramatically and warningly, had had a depressing effect, which the garish light of the full day had not been sufficient to entirely dissipate. She was not superstitious and therefore put no credence in the old woman's words. Nevertheless, whenever they recurred to her they filled her with creepy and shaky sensations.

She had scarcely fallen asleep, to dream of Seal, when she was aroused by the sound of cat-like footsteps.

They were within the room, and seemed to emerge from a dark corner which held a seldom-used closet.

She had not thought to examine this closet before retiring; and now as she listened, pantingly, to the low, shuffling tread, she felt sure some one had been concealed in this closet at the time she entered the room.

She strove to cry out in her fright, but the words choked her. She essayed to clamber from the bed and rush wildly for the corridor beyond the locked door, but her paralyzed limbs refused to do her bidding.

"Who is there?" she at length managed to ask, in a strained, unnatural voice.

There was no reply, only the steady, horrible advance of those shuffling feet.

A sickening sense of fear made her faint and giddy.

"Who are you?" she again whispered, her words thrilling through the little room with a peculiar hissing vibration.

For answer the unknown creature, whether human or ogress she could not tell, sprang furiously at the bed.

Then her tongue was unloosed, and a wild scream rung shrilly through the house.

"Take that!" came the words, in the voice of the woman who had intruded on the wedding. "I warned you to beware of the fate of Jim Carlow! You thought I was babbling nonsense. Take that! And that!"

She uplifted a knife and struck savagely at Marian. The latter, after having uttered that piercing scream, had cowered beneath the bed-clothing and drawn it about her head for protection. It now served as a shield of defense.

The weapon was only a dull case-knife purloined from the pantry below, and made no impression on the thick coverings.

Seeing this the crazed woman strove with her skinny fingers to draw the coverings away.

Marian resisted with all her might, retaining her grasp with the fierceness of desperation, and sending up one startled scream after another.

The household was being aroused. Excited voices could be even heard in the street, inquiring what it all meant.

Yet, heedless of all this, the hag continued to lunge with the knife, and fight with the fury of a demon.

"I warned you to beware of the fate of Jim Carlow!" she kept repeating, interjecting the sentences between the blows. "I hate you! I hate you. You disobeyed me last night, and you shall suffer for it! Do you hear? you shall suffer for it!"

She seemed preternaturally strong, and, in spite of Marian's frantic efforts, succeeded in withdrawing the shield, and was making lunges at the young woman's body, when the door of the room was hurled open and the startled inmates of the house appeared.

One of them bore a lamp, and as soon as its rays revealed something of what was occurring, the man of the house, who had broken in the door with his broad shoulder, flung himself on the infuriated hag.

It required a fierce combat and the exercise of all his strength to wrest from her the knife, and force her into subjection.

The sounds of the struggle, together with the cries of the scared women, drew several men from the street; and these now lent their assistance in binding her.

Disarmed and helpless she was borne fighting from the room.

Marian was in a hysterical state, and the women were scarcely equal to the task of soothing and quieting her.

Seated on the floor of one of the lower rooms, the withered and vindictive crone glared around on her captors, with the fierce looks of a snared hawk.

"You think you have saved her, but you have not!" she snapped, bringing her teeth together like the click of a beak. "Nothing can save her from me; for I hate her. I hate her! I hate her!"

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed one of the men, who had been eying her curiously. "I guess you are old Meg Carlow?"

"What is it to you who I am?"

She seemed somewhat taken aback.

"I reckon you're old Meg!" he avowed, wagging his head sagely. "I seen you once, ten or fifteen years ago; an' you were a good deal handsomer than you are now. You an' Carlow lived up on the Roaring Fork, then, an' I went up there to see him about some cattle. But, I thought you were dead long ago. Carlow give it out that way."

"I've as good a right to live as my betters," she snarled, sulkily. "Mebbe I am Meg Carlow. An' then mebbe I ain't. It's an honest name, ain't it?"

"What'd you want to kill her for?" another inquired, jerking his thumb toward the ceiling.

"Because she was Jim Carlow's pet! Bah! as if Jim Carlow could ever care for anything but his cattle and his money! I hated him and I hate her. Carlow deserted me, an' then reported that I was dead. That's the kind of a man Jim Carlow was!"

This recollection brought from her such a tirade of vituperation and general abuse of the human race that it was unbearable; and one of the officers of the town, having made his appearance, the distracted and raving old woman was given into his charge for safe keeping.

CHAPTER XX. CONCLUSION.

SEAL SHELTON drew in his pony with a nervous jerk. He was riding, with Colton and Kent Kirby, at the head of the victorious party on the return journey from Rogue River Ranch.

The red streakings of early dawn were beginning to tinge the eastern sky, but it was not this that caused him to rein in so quickly and stare so hard at the reddish bands. There was a dash of a deeper, angrier hue. A fiery prong had been suddenly thrust upward against the low line of the brightening horizon.

It was in the direction of Piebald, which was now scarcely more than a half-mile away.

The entire party came to a halt.

"One of the buildings is on fire," Colton exclaimed, in an anxious voice.

The statement brought a feeling of hope to the closely guarded prisoners. In the excitement incident to a fire some loophole of escape might present.

However, Colton was never a man to take needless chances. He ordered redoubled vigilance on the part of the guards, and then commanded a rapid advance.

The little cavalcade flew over the prairie at an exceedingly lively pace, and in a few minutes the town was reached.

Throughout this short ride Seal Shelton had grown every moment more and more uneasy. As he turned into the main street his worst fears were confirmed. The house in which he had left Marian was the one which was burning!

A few startled people were gathering in the streets, shouting "fire" to arouse their neighbors. The flames were making alarming headway.

He could not doubt they were of incendiary origin, for they were shooting up from half a dozen different points.

With a chill clutching at his heart, and forgetful of the prisoners whom it was his duty to assist in guarding, he raced his broncho madly up the street.

Then for the first time he became aware that a tattered and maniacal woman was dancing frenziedly about in the yard. Until that moment she had been silent. Now she raised her voice shrilly. Evidently she recognized him.

"You are too late! Too late!" she screamed, waving her arms like ragged banners. "You shall never see her alive. She will burn! Burn! I killed Jim Carlow, and I shall complete my revenge by killing her. Ha, ha, ha! See him ravel!"

He had thrown himself from the saddle in a very agony of fear.

Almost at the same moment a number of heads were thrust from the upper windows of

the building. Her screams had aroused the frightened inmates, who, until then, had been sleeping in blissful ignorance of the insidious advances of the fire.

Meg Carlow had been placed in the jail of the town, in a cell adjoining that of Tom Conner. As soon as her eyes fell on him—the partitions were of iron lattice-work—she threw herself against the bars in a savage effort to reach him. Connor retreated in considerable terror, as she glared at him with a gaze that seemed to burn.

"Take her away!" he pleaded. "She will kill me, if you don't! I know who she is. She is the woman that tried to kill me on the Rogue River Cliff. She was dressed as a man, then."

The terrible struggle on the cliff was of such recent occurrence, and the features of his assailant had been so firmly impressed on him, that he could not fail to recognize her now, even though the garb was altered.

Her presence startled and bewildered him. It was like the appearance of one rising from the dead.

How had she escaped death in the river? The wild current had also favored her by flinging her into a granite-locked nook, from whence she had been able to draw herself into the security of the bushes that bordered it; and there she had lain in concealment until Kirby ceased his search of the shores.

Meg Carlow's manifestations of hate were now so deadly that she was removed to another part of the prison; and from this point she managed to make her escape a few hours later.

Long brooding over the wrongs inflicted by Jim Carlow had made of her an irresponsible and raving maniac. She had slain Carlow, and was resolved to have the life of every one supposed by her to be his favorite. Hence, her attack on the foreman, whom she had reason to think Carlow's trusted lieutenant; and her later attempts to kill Marian.

But to return from this digression to the fire! As Seal Shelton rushed toward the nearest doorway, she threw herself across his path and endeavored to stop him.

A crowd was rapidly gathering, and ladders were being brought for the purpose of reaching the upper windows. It was already plain that any efforts to save the building were useless.

Shelton hurled the infuriated woman aside, and with a heavy kick broke in the door. Then he bounded through the gathering smoke, up the stairway to Marian's room.

She had been aroused by the outcries, and had arisen and dressed as soon she knew the house was on fire, and was now advancing tremblingly into the corridor.

She greeted Seal with exclamations of delirious delight.

In return he gave her a hurried embrace and kiss; then, lifting her in his strong arms, he dashed for the stairway, up which the choking smoke was swirling in a dense spiral.

He had scarcely set foot on the upper steps when a flash of red flame leaped into the room below, and the ominous hiss and roar of the fire told that it had eaten through the thin partition and was threatening to bar their progress.

He was about to turn back and seek an exit by way of one of the windows, but a glance across the corridor showed the way was blocked in that direction.

A babel of sounds and cries reached them from the outside, and the thumping of ladders against the hot walls told of the efforts that were being put forth to rescue the imperiled people.

With a fierce determination Seal turned again to the stairway and leaped down it with his half-fainting burden. The flames had crept over the floor and were writing in fantastic shapes directly across the path he was compelled to pursue.

At the foot of the stairs he caught up a mat from the floor, twisted it about their heads, and then rushed unflinchingly into the flames.

A prolonged cheer greeted their appearance. They were safe from the fire, having escaped with only a few slight burns.

Meg Carlow had been again seized and retaken to the prison. There she was visited a few hours later by the sheriff, together with Shelton and Kirby. The visit was made in pursuit of information.

The old woman was as fiery-eyed and vindictive as ever; and now that she saw no occasion for further secretiveness, exhibited an insane delight in recounting her bloodthirsty deeds.

In her successful assault on Jim Carlow she had shown all the craft and cunning of which maniacs are frequently possessed. She had gone to the ranch for the express purpose of murder-

ing him. Creeping catlike up to the door of the ranch-house, she found him alone. There was no one else on the place.

She knew Carlow to be wide awake and quick-fingered, and so she stole up the back stairway to await a favorable opportunity. In the rooms above she found the dagger, and her eyes alighting on some of Marian's apparel, she conceived the idea of wearing the shoes. She thought to thus strike a double blow. It would be a victory indeed to slay Carlow and have the murder charged against Marian.

When she finally crept down-stairs, she found that Carlow had fallen asleep on the floor; and while in this helpless attitude she plunged the dagger to his heart. Then she retraced her way up-stairs, placed Carlow's money under what she thought Marian's pillow, left the building by the way she had entered it, tossed the bloody shoes and knife into the mouth of the old well, and glided from the place as silently as she had come.

The ill-treatment which Carlow had been visiting on Marian, together with the resulting quarrels, and the hasty and inconsiderate words and entries in the diary, really seemed to make out so black a case that Kent Kirby was fully justified in his conclusions.

The indications pointing to Sylvia Sterling as the murderess were equally misleading and untrustworthy. She had erred and been very foolish, and for this she was doomed to suffer in bitter and repentant tears; but she had never held aught against Jim Carlow. The money given by her to Tom Conner had been honestly obtained from the sale of a few cattle which a friend had saved to her from the wreck of her father's fortune. It was perhaps not his fault that he had been imposed on and had taken a few counterfeit bills in payment. As for the bill with the ominous stain of blood, it had been turned over in payment by a butcher; and the stain of bloody fingers evidenced nothing worse than the slaying of a steer.

Sylvia has long since regained her usual elasticity of spirits, has recognized and confessed the errors which were the outgrowth of a half-crazed brain, and is now the happy and contented wife of a prosperous ranchman of the Yellowstone.

Meg Carlow was given proper medical attention, and her reason was finally restored. But, her heart and her life had been blasted; and her death, when it came, was not unwelcome to her.

Seal Shelton and his handsome wife have made the Rogue River Ranch their home. Seal feels that his faith in Marian has been amply vindicated by time; and truly it has, for no worthier or happier couple reside within the boundaries of the Centennial State.

Tom Conner and his associates of the Roster of Rogues, are "doing time" in the Penitentiary at Canyon City; and are having abundant opportunity to learn the old and bitter lesson that "the way of the transgressor is hard."

As for Kent Kirby, the blatant, the wide-mouthed, the irrepressible High-Kicker from Killbuck, he is still at his old tricks; and among detectives is accounted one of the shrewdest and most successful in the West. He has, however, learned one lesson; and that is, that circumstantial evidence cannot always be relied on.

He acknowledged this freely in the case of Marian Carlow; and among all their friends none are accorded a more cordial welcome at Rogue River Ranch than Kent Kirby, the great detective.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers.

98 William Street, New York.